Journal of the Arts

The Watermark

Volume 22 | Spring 2014

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Journal of the Arts

The Watermark

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Midori Gleason drew and designed the cover of this issue. She used a quote from Ovid's Metamorphoses.

You can read this issue in full, and get a the PDF on our website: TheWatermarkJournal.com

The Watermark accepts submissions year round. Deadlines for specific issues and contests vary. We accept contributions of up to 8,000 words of prose, up to 8 poems, or up to 16 photos or artworks by email. Write keywords (photos, art, poetry, story, etc.) in the subject line of your email eg. "Photo Essay Submission, Six Weeks in Rwanda." In the body of your email write a few friendly sentences about yourself, a bio, whatever you want your readers to know. Attach your submission as a PDF or Word document. Include your name, the title of your submission, the date, and the page numbers in the header or footer of each page. Please allow us three to six months to respond.

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Happy reading!

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A Ghillie Suit Is Made of Polyester

Miles Stafford

I had this friend when I was a kid.

One night, she woke up from a beautiful dream. Creaking floorboards called to her from the waking world. The beautiful grove remained, but the sound of weight shifting across the floor of her room echoed in on either side of her peaceful vision, beginning to draw her out of sleep. She was being stretched between the two worlds, like being drawn up from the bottom of a well. She wanted to stay asleep, but that sound, that sound: someone was in her room.

She felt her bed around her, stretching her feet slowly into its cool recess, beyond the heat trapped outline of where her body had been motionless moments before, still in the perfect grove of trees and stone. She unstuck her eyelids and looked toward the ceiling. She told herself that no one could be in there with her. That would, of course, be irrational. That was a word girls in her school would throw around when they were calling each other bitches- "irrational"-and things like "you're such a pathological liar, Blair." It was natural to fear the dark. Besides, her family's house was a fortress.

Nevertheless, she probed the darkness of her room by opening her eyes wide and letting the black soak in. She could see nothing but the faint depth of a line where her dark walls met the white ceiling. She rolled over onto her side and tried to fish out details of the dream, hoping to slip back into the pool of

wherever she had been. *What was it? A beach? There was water or something, right?* But the dream had burst the moment she had woken up and began to pour and drain out her ears, soaking her flannel pillow.

As her eyes continued to adjust to the darkness, she noticed a bulk in the corner of the room. It wasn't something she recognized from among her possessions: not her desk, where her school books collected dust, not her chair, not her bedside lamp, not her chest of drawers, where she stuffed little perverted notes written to a hopefully hopeful future self, nor the stickered guitar leaning against the outline of her shut closet door. Everything was in its place, as it always was, except for that bulk, its corners muted, its form mystified by darkness. She sucked in all the air in the room, hoping to suffocate her intruder. The shape lurched toward her as she tore at the lamp switch by her bed. The little light spread itself over her little purple painted bedroom.

She sucked in all the air in the room, hoping to suffocate her intruder.

There, in the corner, sat a mass of green, greenish yellow, brown, and black, the colors swarming into one another, strips and shreds of what was meant to look like swamp debris, like leaves or something. A strange light reflected from a dark space in the center of the green abyss, a waxy, greasy, blackened face, and in its center stared two yellowed eyes with cold blue centers. Military face paint has a way of giving a yellowy piss stain to the whites of eyes. Her father had been stalking her in his ghillie suit, even as she slept.

The beauty of the dream was dead and gone now, its dampness left on her pillow suddenly dried up by the little light, replaced by feelings of uncontrollable hatred towards her father. Her face contorted in different curled spasms, her lips peeling back, exposing her gritting teeth adorned with metal wires and orange plastic bands. Her eyes watered, saturating themselves at the point when anger towards one's parents becomes overwhelming despair. She choked it all down as she watched him creep out of the room, a lumpy moving shrub, hunched and maybe defeated, or maybe ashamed, if not for that greased, sculpturally severe face and those dead blue eyes. She knew that he'd go into her brothers' room next, and she was sure they'd get a real kick out of it.

She tried to roll over onto her other side, hoping to get back to that place in her dream. She still couldn't remember what it was, but the void it left behind was cool and safe. She tried to crawl up inside there to sleep, her ear pinned to the side of the cave it had carved out, listening to the water trickling somewhere far off for clues. The muffled thunder of Jujitsu thumped through her bedroom wall, followed by to the hollow grunts of Krav Maga; her brothers had been internet trained in both. The twins must have been up, wide awake, stalking

their father as he stalked them, and had gotten the jump on him as he entered the room, or maybe they had reinstalled the boobie traps they had riddled throughout their small shared room. She could just barely make out her father telling them both how proud he was, admiring the knots used in their traps, tucking them back into their bunks, and they in return saluting solemnly.

She woke up at five and dressed herself in the cold darkness of morning. She drew her large camouflage sweatshirt over head and looked down at the endless twisting pattern of greens and browns that made up her entire wardrobe. She opened her closet, slowly at first, dreading the thought of finding her father sleeping, still in his ghillie suit. She braced herself in front of the mirror. *Sigh*. She didn't want to wear pink or anything like that, just a pair of jeans.

Her weight carried her down the stairs, one combat booted foot after the other. The staircase opened into the once quaint fall patterned entrance way of the home. There by the door sat a small table meant to have keys or a purse laid out across it, overtaken by some Thanksgiving themed nicknacks: a small statue of an Indian and one of a Pilgrim, stuck together forever in an orange and brown felt landscape. It was March, but the home was in a now perpetual celebration of Autumn and its dead leaves. Their mother had had a flair for home decoration, but the coming apocalypse had put an end to that.

Spread out in front of the Indian and Pilgrim, she found her brothers and father already taking stock of the gear. This was one of the most nauseating tasks that the girl faced. She knew that the ritual was not for safety's sake, or in the interests of being thorough, as her father might claim. Instead, it was in order to methodically revisit each material object that made up the backbone of her family's lifestyle. As the father checked each item of the list ("20 sealed MREs? Check. Water Purification Kit? Check. 3 AR 15s? Check. 50 Cases of Ammunition? Wait a minute-48, 49, 50-Check. Rain gear? Check."), he was able to affirm and reaffirm that he possessed the equipment necessary to survive, that he had made the effort, gone online, and bought this stuff, the kid who brings in too many toys to show and tell.

He was able to affirm and reaffirm that he possessed the equipment necessary to survive...

In the kitchen, she found the milk to still be expired. Perishable goods had been nearly forgotten in the family as it transitioned into packaged meals that would keep for eternity. She poured herself stale frosted flakes, added powdered milk and water, the mixture looking all opaque. She could see through the milk and through the corn flakes' sweet, sugary coating, into the corn and out into the fields where their stalks still swayed. It reminded her a little of her dream,

but not enough.

The family drove for hours and the girl watched as the forest continued its thaw out the truck's rear window. She saw one solitary bird floating around high above the trees, drifting here and there in the white expanse above the highway. The father's big mittened hands, with the trigger finger separated in one polar fleece and gortex tube, so he could still shoot in them, dominated the large steering wheel with those little rubber nubs for grip, powering the car onward. He craned his head periodically back and into the cab to quiz her two brothers on different survival facts. "How long can you live without food? How long can you live without water? How many bullets in a magazine for a Beretta 9 Millimeter?" The freckles on their faces seemed to want to shoot off the surface of their skin and leave torn holes in everything like the pipe bombs they described to her how to make. The girl watched her father's eyes look upon his sons' softly in the rear view mirror, not smiling, but supremely satisfied. It was clear to her that he was thinking about how his family was going to survive, even if took the whole world to die around them. They would survive!

The freckles on their faces seemed to want to shoot off the surface of their skin and leave torn holes in everything, like the pipe bombs they described...

The camp was exactly as she had remembered it. Her father had bought it last year, and since then, they had returned nearly 20 times. They slammed the doors of the big pickup truck, newly painted matte forest green, its broken sheen refusing to reflect light, like a faded gatorade bottle refusing to rot on the forest floor. Breathing in the wet mountain air, they gave each other a look that said, "No place like home".

She walked off without saying goodbye. Her father and his pair of matching sons didn't even look up from the arrival to mountain base camp, counting and double counting the gear. Next, they would spend a couple of hours setting up the night vision goggles and securing the perimeter. The girl chose to spend her time at the camp wandering around the woods, essentially meditating on her hatred of her father and family life, recalling times that kids had gone through her bag on the bus and found her gas mask, or how she liked someone in school and had never been able to chat with him online because her father would stay up all night watching videos about doomsday scenarios, or what plants to eat when you're starving in the wilderness on the family's desktop computer.

This time, she explored farther than normal. She came across an opening,

the deep woods giving way to a clearing filled with outcroppings of slate tearing through the earth, pines growing in between, roots mingling with the cold stones. It was the place in her dream from the night before. The snow had long melted away revealing the weak limp grass underneath. The flat plates of slate stretched out at the angle of praying hands toward the distilling twilight.

The girl came up close to one of the slate formations. She smelled the cold wet emanating from its blackboard gray surface, made up of sheet after sheet of slate pressed tightly together by the heft of the Earth like a hardened vanilla wafer. Her nose couldn't get enough of it and her mouth began to salivate. She stuck out her tongue and tasted the metallic bitterness of the stone. She crouched, keeping her forehead flush with the cool stone, while her fingers scraped at the dark soil beneath her knees. She gathered up a handful and stuck it in her mouth, holding her hand and the dirt in there, savouring the rich taste until it began to dissolve on her tongue, and then she swallowed it all.

Her father came upon her, his sons trailing off behind, pausing periodically to aim their guns at different shapes between the trees. He saw his daughter, her face pressed up against the stone, her hands petting its wide flatness. *Now there are somet hings you just can't prepare for,* he thought. *My daughter is mentally ill.* His steel reinforced, waterproof, tactical combat boots slipped on the limp grass. His body, clothed in a mimicry of the forest floor, twisted on itself high in the air, like a flag in the wind, landing head first into the jagged edge of one of the slate formations. His head imploded like the paper mâché planets his sons had made in school, crushing his final thought.

How I Met Frex

John Mazzarella

I never could get my hyper drive to put me just where I wanted to be. It wasn't too bad, mind you. Relative to the half dozen light-year jumps I usually made, the 10^(-10)% discrepancy only ever added up to a few hundred KM off target. I usually just made sure to punch in coordinates well outside of any major gravity well, and never had much of a problem. In fact sometimes I'd even make a game out of it. Calculate the center point between a planet and its moon, or a sun an its planet (relative to mass), and guess which side of the first Lagrangian I'd end up on.

This time, though, the coin landed on its edge. Initial readings put me smack dab on the fulcrum, split even between the two competing gravity pulls of a dirty green gas giant and its watery blue moon. While I wondered if leaning to the side of the cockpit would pull me to one side or another, the radio came to life ripping my out of my daydream.

"Quit farting around up there and burn into orbit, you're not getting paid to pick your nose," came a smoky, feminine voice.

Charming.

"Roger. Punching full burn, initiating orbit," I replied, then thought a beat about the voice on the line, "Hey, who's this? Ain't Eric supposed to be running dispatch tonight?"

"Eric called out. This is Frex. I'm new," was the curt answer, with the audible annoyance and scruffy accent that painted a full picture of the kind of lady that works for an interplanetary cargo company in the outer colonies.

I punched in a few keystrokes, then hit the button to initiate orbit. The ship calculated the thrust and direction needed for a near perfect orbit into a landing—a problem that would have made a 20th century high school calc. student stay up half the night—in the time it took for the button to un-depress.

I smiled for a second in anticipation, and hit the intercom button.

"Hey Frex, do you like tacos?" I asked into the radio.

"What??" the voice half yelled, noticeably caught off guard.

"The ship's showin' 8 minutes 'til docking. What do you say you meet me then, and I'll show you this taco place I know in Lambda sector?" I messaged back, with a grin in my voice.

I quickly heard the distinctive click of the radio connection cutting off. I sat back with a laugh as the outer hull started glowing with reentry heat.

"She didn't say no!"

Primitives

John Mazzarella

Like most corporate secrets, news of the discovery spread quickly but organically starting from science-types, to the bureaucracies that managed and funded them, through pillow-talk to spouses and com-channels to buddies and boasting to bartenders and barbers and a million other service industry gossips. It wasn't three weeks until everywhere from the towers of the Capitol, to the waste management barracks on lunar colony were abuzz with talk of the new world.

Oh, there had been other worlds, of course. For the first few years, every world that G.E.P. landed on was huge news. Every media broadcast ran and re-ran the first images of each new planet-fall. Every school child - and if they were honest, many of their parents - dreamt of signing up for the next Galactic Exploratory Partnership deep space mission. Dreamt of stepping foot on some new alien soil, discovering some new alien race. Dreamt of becoming insanely rich by being on the front lines of a new colonization boom.

And colonization was desperately needed. There were too many people crammed into too small a planet, thirty-five billion to be exact. Resources could probably support everyone comfortably, but too much was wasted by inefficiencies and corruption and infighting. There were space stations and moon colonies and asteroid bases, but not many people would willingly live out their lives without real land and open skies and fresh air. For years, alien planet

colonization struck at the imaginations of millions as a way to spread out from cramped cities and corrupt governments.

But time went on and each rocky, barren, uninhabitable planet started blurring with the next in the public's mind. It seemed each report was a duplicate of all the previous. "The starship suchandsuch today arrived on planet suchandsuch. The planet is not habitable but the P.G.E. is excited to extend the scope of scientific knowledge yet again in hopes of some day finding blah blah blah..."

There was a bit of a stir at the first discovery of extra terrestrial life, but a slimy puddle on a methane-filled moon turned out more-so fodder for entertainment broadcast hosts than inspiration for the masses. G.E.P. eventually found more complex life on future planetary landings, but never much intelligence, and never any truly hospitable environments. The public quickly realized the super-advanced terrors and invading hoards of the old space broadcast serials were not to be. Galactic exploration turned out as mundane and slow-paced as any of the other sciences - and slightly less profitable.

But Earth changed all that. The second-generation starship Nova Gazer heard the world before they saw it. From even the outer edges of the system, that dim spec on the view screens was a sun of RF signals. It seemed the people of this rock had discovered radio broadcasting and used it for land to land communication, not caring a pittance for the signals propagating out into space for all to hear.

From even the outer edges of the system, that dim spec on the view screens was a sun of RF signals.

G.E.P. hoped to keep its discovery quiet, but it quickly became clear that this was too big a secret to keep, and officially announced what the entire population had already heard on net rumors. The planet had breathable air and drinkable water with a natural diversity and beauty to rival the most picturesque locations back home. There was intelligent life, but relatively primitive and making little use of the resources they had.

The crew of the Nova Gazer had first contact with the Natives, and were met with curiosity and celebration. It seems they also wondered about alien life, and even had somewhat laughable attempts to contact other worlds. Technology was freely traded, and the Natives—who called themselves Humans—started integrating the advanced technologies into their own. However it quickly became apparent that something was wrong.

Software in the advanced technology reacted aggressively against the humans' unprotected systems. Some code written for a children's game infected

the humans' computer-controlled infrastructure. The game was for the player to counteract the computer's attempts to take control of a system. It was an innocent game that young children played, which all other systems had more-than-sufficient security in place to protect from any real damage. The human systems, however, were not created for defense of anything like this new threat. What was a harmless insignificant game, became a malicious computer virus for human computers, and once introduced, havoc spread.

Human land and air transportation crafts became uncontrollable, accelerating and crashing at random, killing hundreds of thousands around the world in a matter of minutes. Most communication systems failed and power management grids switched off. As the line of night fell swiftly across the globe, a wave of panic and rioting followed. The human governments soon regrouped and readied their armies and weapon systems, angry at their new visitors for causing the chaos. These computer systems, however, too were quickly infiltrated. But this time, the machines of war weren't simply turned off or destroyed.

The crew of the Nova Gazer watched the massacre dispassionately. Why should they care if some backwards alien primitives couldn't keep control of their own technology?

The game was smart and would take advantage of its captured resources in new and clever ways. Players would find their computer-opponent increasingly adapting to new tactics as its intuitive semantic algorithms analyzed each new captured resource's capabilities and used them against the player. The virus now had control of the deadliest tools that humans had created, and it quickly learned how to use them. The first target was infantry and non-networked equipment – any threat it couldn't control was destroyed. Finally, the last few systems were cracked, these having above-average security restrictions, and between twenty and three hundred nuclear weapons were launched at every major and minor population center on the planet. In about 48 hours, the population of earth went from about eight billion to about four hundred million –5% of its previous number. The remaining humans were mostly in rural, agrarian locations, in lesser developed sections of the planet. The computer code, having mostly destroyed all of its captured computer systems, and seeing no active systems left uncontrolled, declared Game Over, and silently powered down.

The crew of the Nova Gazer watched the massacre dispassionately. Why should they care if some backwards alien primitives couldn't keep control of their own technology? Anyway, it was just as well to cull the local population to

make room for colonization efforts. The radiation could easily be scrubbed, and the cities would have had to be cleared anyway. Quite frankly, most of the crew were too busy to notice the ruckus, and were instead focusing on coordinating colonization deals and digitally-schmoozing with the big-wigs back home hoping to score a higher position in the colony, maybe even a governorship!

A few hundred years later, Earth had a population of ten billion colonists and ten million humans. Some liberals were ashamed and angry about The Human Heartbreak—the treatment of humans during colonization and after, including painful mass-relocations and harsh retaliation against small rebellions. Some radicals even claimed that human computer systems were intentionally infected with the computer program that caused their downfall in order to speed up colonization, but this has never been proven. Humans were given some land in special Human Preservation Cities. Some human culture and rituals persisted. Colonist youths will sometimes get tattoos of meaningful words in the human's languages like "Honor" and "El Jefe" and "Swag." Most folks didn't care much, either chalking up any past unpleasantness to the ever-marching tides of progress, or just placating their conscience with modern creature comforts, not thinking about what it took for them to have been made possible.

The humans lived on, but never fulfilling their old spark of potential. Never again the masters of their own world.

Carnaval Arroyano

Adalene M. Rodriguez

When I was eight, February had become my favorite month of the year– and not because of Valentine's Day—but because of what would happen the third weekend of the month. I remember waking up early and full of excitement. I was finally going to the carnival. We had to walk quite a bit because there would be no parking where the carnival took place, but I did not mind. I just wanted to be there in time for the parade with its colorful floats, the dancers, queens and marching band. It was all so exiting. But what made the carnival of 1999 different, the reason I cannot forget it, happened after the parade, after the sun had set, after all the laughter and happy memories had been made.

I was playing with a bunch of friends in the back of Juni's pickup truck waiting for my uncle to bring me the hot potato I had been asking for. I was hungry but I was having so much fun that I did not mind waiting. The night was so pretty, the sky was full of stars and so many people were socializing around us. We were in the Malecon and I could see the waves in the sea, they looked dark and foreboding. I could see my uncles and my mom talking and my little brother playing on the floor of the truck. He was three and not much fun but suddenly none of that mattered. A fight had broken out in the bar across the street and I could see the commotion.

Two others are chasing out a guy from the place. They are hitting him over and over again with pool cues. I see him fall several times but each time he just gets back up. He takes off his shirt and the hits keep coming. I am frozen in place. He doesn't fight back, he just takes the hits as they come with his head held high. Suddenly two cars appear out of nowhere, full of guys. I don't know who they are but the moment they get out of the car they go straight to the fight and start hitting the lone guy. There must be at least ten guys now, all against one, it's not a fair fight. I hear someone screaming for the kids to hide behind the truck, to get down, but I am in a trance and can't move. Everything gets loud and I want to scream but no sound will come out.

I hear someone screaming for the kids to hide behind the truck, to get down, but I am in a trance and can't move.

One of my mom's friends realizes that I am still standing and he calls my name several times. The sound seems to come from far away, like a whisper in the air. I want to answer but my body does not respond. I am in shock and scared. "Why is no one doing anything? Where are the police? They are going to kill him!" And similar phrases keep racing in my mind. I feel strong arms surround me, they are taking me away from the fight, but I can still see it happening from over the shoulder of the person who is carrying me away. Suddenly I am put behind the truck with the other kids but I am so small that I can still see their feet from under the truck, they partially hide the guy who is now on the floor. Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Everyone is running. There is so much blood on the street. I know he is dead now and I feel numb. He won't be getting back up again. Now the attackers leave the scene really fast in their cars and I can see people getting close to the body trying to get a peek. They just stand there watching in morbid fascination. It's like a spell has been cast over them, one that overrides their common sense. They did not help the guy in life and now they make of his death a kind of morbid sideshow.

My aunt comes for us and decides to takes us to her husband's grandmother's house. I don't even remember walking there but suddenly there is a cup of hot chocolate in my hands and my aunt is asking me if I want an apple. I don't want it but drink the chocolate while I hear her retelling what just happened in the Malecon. And I keep wondering, where were the police that earlier in the day I could see in every corner? Later when I got to my grandma's house I was no longer numb. A new feeling was running through me and I needed to let it out.

"Abuelita!, Abuelita! Mataron un muchacho en el Malecon! " I scream just as I pass the entrance to the house. A part of me wants to forget everything

ever happened but another wants to tell everyone what happened. Maybe then this heavy feeling that has settled over me will leave. So I let it all out and my grandma just listens to me. I can see it upsets her that this happened, especially in front of all the kids, and she tells me not to worry, but not even once does she or anyone for that matter tell me what I want to hear: that the criminals will be caught and that they will pay for what they did. I don't think anyone believed the police would be effective. The neighbors come in later and I learn that the guy who was killed was only visiting his mother and lived in the U.S. I learn that he was killed because he talked to a woman in the bar and her jealous boyfriend did not like that. What a stupid reason to kill for.

COLORs

Tomas Hernandez

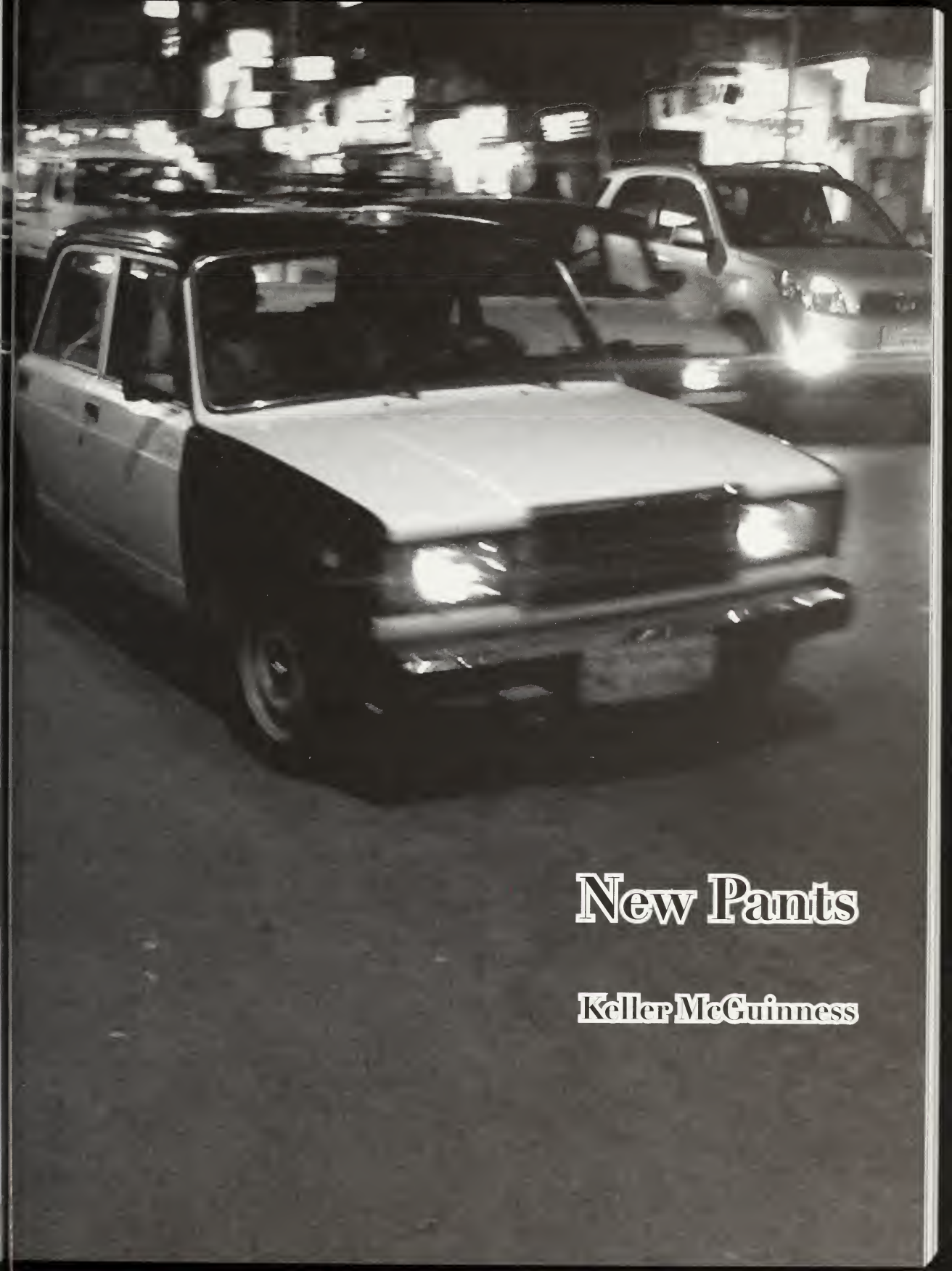
I remember in my childhood more sunny days than cloudy ones. I remember bright colored houses that all seemed the same size, although some were larger than others. This was a wonderful time. I remember these yellow candies that tasted like every sugar crusted custard, every tangerine, every lemon drop -- not the ones that were very sour but the ones that were just right. The candies looked like the perfect yellow circle a child draws representing the sun. These were truly halcyon moments in my youth. I remember running through my uncle's farm with my cousins and my next-door neighbor chasing butterflies with nets. It seemed like we were running in slow motion through the fields, catching colors that surpassed even the hues of rainbows. I also remember later, when I was a few years older, catching these big green grasshoppers that could fly and that had yellow and brown wings. I do not remember going in slow motion then. You had to be quick to catch them because they could fly away, so you had to be very quiet and slowly approach them, then, as fast as you could, snatch them up in your hand. Besides being fast you had to be very gentle at the same time or you would crush them. But no matter how gentle I was, even if I did not crush them, the pressure from my hands would make them bleed. Their blood was sticky and a shiny amber color. At that age it seemed to me that it was the same color as sunshine. Even though they bled it did not occur to me that I had hurt them and that they were wounded, and I would let them go afterwards.

I was innocent then, never realizing I was causing injury and pain.

When I did something to get myself in trouble I would be put on punishment and not be allowed to play with my friends; but there was a hole in our backyard at the bottom of the fence caused by the roots of a pomegranate tree that had forced its way through the wood where I would go and sit and talk to my friend next door. The pomegranate was one of my favorite fruits. When you opened it there were all these bright shining red seeds that looked like rubies. Supposedly these fruits, according to myth, were the fruits that were eaten in the Garden of Eden, not an apple.

Another of my playmates was my pet rooster. He was crimson and orange. My grandfather used to enter him in cockfights. I guess he always won because they fought to the death and my rooster always came back home. We lived on a small farm and one day when I came home from school my grandmother had made chicken stew but I could not find my pet. At dinner, I refused to eat the stew, even though my grandmother said it was chicken stew. I knew in my five-year-old mind that it was rooster stew. I guess my crimson and orange rooster was a winner no longer.

One day I was watching my cat that I loved. This kitten, with its mixture of shining golden-orange, white, and black satiny coat and its soft purr seemed like the epitome of innocence. She had caught this little brown mouse and was playing with it. What I saw was a cute but deadly game. Although the cat did not know this and was acting just as a cat ought to act, I am sure the mouse was not enjoying itself nearly as much as the cat. This made me realize that innocence is not all it is chalked up to be, since all innocence consists of is not knowing the difference between right and wrong. It is ultimately knowledge for which we should strive for in the end; it is only knowledge that can lead to a harmonious existence for all. But was there ever anything more enticing than that unblemished purity, which is the semblance of innocence hiding that inclination for savagery so completely and sometimes so tragically? Remembering back I also recollect attending a funeral of a young cousin of mine. That day did not seem particularly sunny, actually everything seemed kind of dull and brown. The landscape seemed tan and barren, the houses did not seem brightly colored- they also seemed brown. But I think the brownest thing I remember seeing was my little cousin in that brown coffin. Yet even after that I can still remember the candy being sweet, the houses being bright, and the big red hibiscus flowers I broke off at the bottom of the calyx and drank the nectar from. But I also learned that things ended, and that this was natural. I learned to respect this cycle because this is the natural course of events, although I do not think I knew fear yet. But what I did know then, that I still know now, is that Ambrosia does exist and that children eat it every day.



New Pants

Keller McGuinness

J.J. Meridian pulls his cab over in front of a hydrant along 9th Ave, just south of Chelsea, and scans the street. His left arm hangs out of the open window and there is a menthol cigarette smoked nearly down to the filter wedged between his stained, stubby fingers. His bosses have been on him for years for smoking in the car, but he has no intention of giving it up. He's been on board too long for them to really do anything about it. They pretend to give him shit for doing it, and he pretends to listen.

He eyes two women heading in his direction, heels clacking against the pavement, moving too fast to be on the clock. The prettier one wearing the shorter skirt notices his curious stare and crinkles her face with disgust. She says something to her friend and they quicken their pace, hurrying along the sidewalk and disappearing around the corner.

"Whores," he spits out as he flicks his cigarette in their direction and starts up the car. He mutters to himself while deciding on where to head off, "Used to be that you knew where to go and who to go to. Now they all look like sluts, none of 'em actually looking to earn a few bucks and help a guy out. It's all one big fuckin' Halloween parade." He pulls the car into the thick late-afternoon traffic and crawls south towards the entrance to the Holland Tunnel. Gotta go to goddamn New Jersey to get laid, fucking shame.

Stuck at a light, he catches a glimpse of his forehead in the mirror. His eyes linger a bit on a faded one-inch scar near his right temple, a memento from his first time paying for it. He smiles at the memory, thinking that it's been far too long since he's been down to Miami Beach. He settles his gaze back on the road ahead.

It had been awkward in the beginning, not knowing the rules, getting ripped off, but he had eventually gotten the hang of it. No big deal, a simple transaction. That first time though… he hadn't seen that coming. Stupid fucking boyfriend didn't know she was turning tricks. Hell of a way to find out! The empty Heineken bottle he took off the side of his head was worth the look on that poor sap's face. Got out of there in a goddamn hurry, out the back door and must have run ten blocks before realizing he'd forgotten his pants. Lucky thing he didn't carry a wallet, kept his cash wadded up in his socks. J.J. had spent the rest of the day on the beach drinking rum, tending to his head wound with some napkins pilfered from a fried chicken stand.

Got out of there in a goddamn hurry, out the back door and must have run ten blocks before realizing he'd forgotten his pants.

As he emerges from the Tunnel on the Jersey side, he is struck with the sudden need to urinate. He usually keeps an empty plastic 2-liter bottle with the top cut off for such emergencies, but he'd decided to toss it a few days ago, thinking he'd soon get another one. The traffic is at a standstill (some sort of police business ahead) and it is about a quarter mile to the nearest place to turn off. He lights a cigarette in order to try to get his mind off the situation. Each passing second is more excruciating than the last. He begins to contemplate the pros and cons of pissing his pants. The car would reek, probably have to be steam-cleaned, and what the hell was he gonna do about his pants? He remembers the reason he'd come to Jersey in the first place and decides to tough it out. He thinks about the desert, about miles of sand and scorching heat, about absolute stillness. He focuses in on an image of a lizard in front of a cactus, flicking its tongue in and out, the sun glaring overhead. There is a noise somewhere in the distance, a slight trickling, getting louder and now gushing and now the desert has become a rushing river. He glances over at the sidewalk in agony and curses at the opened hydrant.

Traffic begins to move, and J.J. smiles at his good fortune. As he approaches the intersection he sees the light turn yellow. The rusted out Buick in front of him inexplicably slows to a stop. The driver cranes his neck out the window, trying to make sense of his surroundings. As the light turns to red, J.J. immediately slams on the car horn and unleashes a barrage of obscenities, which only increases

his discomfort. And then it happens. He feels the warm burst fill the crotch of his pants, spreading out slowly towards his knees, pooling beneath him on the seat. The sensation is not entirely unpleasant, it is almost holy, a self-baptism, a complete surrender. The sounds of honking and yelling rustle him from his thoughts and he sees that the light is green. He casually makes his way through the intersection and contemplates his next move.

The sensation is not entirely unpleasant, it is almost holy, a self-baptism, a complete surrender.

He remembers that there is a Salvation Army near one of his usual haunts, only about fifteen minutes away. The talent over there is hit-or-miss, but at least he could take care of his pants situation. His lower half is growing uncomfortable; the urine is turning cold and sticky. The squish of the seat as he eases the cab through turns is making him queasy. Shit, closed. The Salvation Army is boarded up. The facade is covered in "for sale" signs and fresh graffiti. He pulls into the small parking lot adjacent to the building and nudges the car into the space furthest from the street. He goes to light a cigarette, only to find the pack is empty. He crumples it up and tosses it out the window. It lands with a dull splash in a grey puddle, spattering the sidewalk in front of the entrance of the vacated building. He reaches across the seat, opens the glove box and retrieves a fresh pack from the carton stashed inside. He unwraps the cellophane, takes out a cigarette, lights it, inhales deeply and tosses the pack onto the dashboard.

There is a knock on his passenger door. A young girl stands with one hand on her hip, motioning with the other for J.J. to open the door for her. She is wearing a short, black, flimsy skirt, and torn red stockings. Her t-shirt bears the name of some long-gone rock club and is a few sizes too small, revealing a pale, faintly scarred midsection. She sports a small ring in her navel, and isn't wearing any shoes. Her dark hair is long and stringy, wet but not washed. JJ looks her over, glances down at his piss-soaked pants, looks back at the girl and reaches over to unlock the door. She checks to make sure no one is watching and quickly gets in.

"So, what's your- ugh, what the hell is that smell? Smells like a fucking bathroom, fuck this." She grabs hastily for the door handle.

"Wait, don't go. I had a problem with the, uh, traffic. Please, I just need some fresh pants and a washroom. Do you, uh, hey, where the hell are your shoes?"

"My feet were killing me so I took 'em off, you make a habit of pissing yourself?" She rolls down the window and then grabs for the pack of cigarettes

resting on the dashboard. "You mind?"

"Nah, go ahead." He fumbles in the change holder between the seats and finds a silver Zippo. He opens it with a practiced flourish and raises it to her lips. His thumb flicks across the igniter but it does not light. "Shit, no fluid, I got some matches here somewhere..."

"Never mind, I've got a lighter inside, probably some pants in there for you too, if you want." She grabs for the handle and swiftly exits the car, again looking around to see if anyone is watching them.

He slowly makes his way out from the front seat of the car. "What, you got an apartment around here or somethin'?" He glances around with a curious suspicion. The street is quiet, very little automobile traffic, nobody around. In the distance he hears an ambulance siren careen away to some unknown tragedy. The woman has disappeared around the side of the building and so he follows, calling after her. "Hey, hold up for chrissakes!"

She is using a key to open a padlock on a windowless door next to an overflowing dumpster on the side of the building. With deftness and ease she slips inside, impatiently beckoning for J.J. to follow. He hesitates for a brief moment, and then shuffles in behind her. For a few minutes, there is nothing but darkness and the sounds of her fumbling around, muttering curses. Then there is the scratchy sound of a match being struck and a candle is lit. In the low light he can make out the shelves lining the walls, packed with shadowy objects: small appliances, dish and glassware, children's toys, books and record albums.

In the distance he hears an ambulance siren careen away to some unknown tragedy. The woman has disappeared . . .

She points to a grouping of canvas bins containing clothes. "You'll find some pants in there, I've got a flashlight here somewhere, hold on..." She rummages through the junk on the shelf nearest the side door and finds what she is looking for.

He catches the small plastic flashlight she throws at him. "You live here or something?"

"Me and my boyfriend broke in here one night about three months ago, right after they closed it down and boarded it up. We were just looking for a place to party, then we started going through all this stuff and well, it was just sort of interesting, ya know? I was getting sick of crashing at his place and he got kicked out of there anyway, so, here we are."

"Boyfriend?" J.J. asks with a hint of annoyance.

"Yeah, what of it? Anyways, I haven't seen him in weeks, fucking asshole. Probably out screwing that slut ex of his, or got himself locked up or whatever. Fuck him."

J.J. turns back to the clothes bin and picks out a pair of brown work pants. "These'll probably do," he mutters as he begins taking off his sodden navy slacks.

"Hey! What the hell? Why don't you go into the corner over there behind that sheet? I don't need to see that shit," she says, putting a hand up over her face in disgust.

He stops and looks at her confused and slightly wounded. He's about to say something about the oddness of this sudden display of prudishness in light of her profession but thinks better of it. "Yeah, sure, whatever," he says and retreats behind the sheet to change.

A radio comes on as he is getting his legs into the new pants, some classic rock song about a car or a girl or both. He gets the pants on and buttoned and they are a few sizes too big and he has no belt. The candlelight suddenly goes out and he realizes he has left the flashlight over by the bin. There is the sound of a door slamming shut, and then laughter, both male and female. J.J. hears the sounds of car doors being opened and closed, an engine coming to life, tires squealing. He gropes his way back to the bin to look for a belt and he thinks about the girl and her asshole boyfriend sitting in his piss, having to smell it, and he smiles.

The Dog

Marissa Higgins

I spilled the lukewarm water down my front.

It was early October, a Tuesday, and the park was surprisingly busy. I frequented it often in the months since I'd become unemployed; after the initial weeks of marginally heavier drinking and sleeping until noon, I became restless and agitated alone in my studio apartment. So I took to the park. The walks were refreshing, at first, and I felt one with my unemployed latte-sipping peers. After a week I brushed my fingers across a bench and felt that the wood was dry – I sat and smiled.

The bench was sturdy. I sometimes felt guilty taking up one of the two benches in the park. On the other side of the curve, so far I couldn't see it clearly without my glasses, three fat women sat on the other bench. Their floral tops distinguished them from the other fat women who frequent the park, and when they sat very still, in the second or third hour of us all being there, I imagined that the flowers spread down their legs and feet, rooting them into the cement. The image made me happy, although I don't know why. A small man was selling hot dogs from his cart and I felt hunger twist in my stomach. I imagined the layers of melted cheese folding over the bun like curls of frosting – I felt the hunks of hot chili dripping between my knuckles. But what about the condiments? Ah, relish, ketchup, mustard – I wanted them all. I licked my bottom lip: I would have two hotdogs. I rose from the bench and straightened

my pants, and that was the first time I saw the dog.

He snuck in front of me, his tiny body swaying back and forth atop his spindly legs. With his eyes to the ground, I wasn't sure how he missed getting trampled by the traffic surrounding the outskirts of the park. The dog kept moving, nearly dance-like in his small, jumpy steps, and arrived at my bench.

He slithered beneath my bench and curled at my feet. I froze. He had a broad body with wide shoulders, a big head, and high hips. His stomach was sucked up inside of himself and his big, dark eyes were stuck on the ground. He lay on the cement and his head poked out beside my shoes. His ears, stuck to the sides of his head—much like his dark, matted fur—caught my attention the most. They were vulnerable to every change in tone, flinching farther into his scalp.

His stomach was sucked up inside of himself and his big, dark eyes were stuck on the ground.

I was terrified. I counted the dog's ribs. I felt an itch beneath my pants and decided the dog had given me fleas, then felt guilty and dismissed the notion. The dog whimpered. I squeezed my hands together at my sides. The dog inched his head closer to my shoes, and I bolted from the bench.

I walked to the hot dog stand with my hands clenched. I pulled several dollar bills and a fistful of dimes out of my pocket and handed them to the little man. He handed me two plain hotdogs, and I layered my own cheese and chili onto the first. "Soon, I will have a helper to do this," he told me, his little teeth gleaming at me from behind his thin lips. I nodded and avoided eye contact, piling ketchup, mustard and relish onto my second hot dog. The mustard crept outside of the bun, and I swallowed the urge to choke on my saliva.

I began eating the chili cheese dog. It tasted creamy and thick, and I felt it coat my lips and drip onto my chin. I smiled. My insides felt warm and suddenly the park seemed so green, so alive, and I felt a tremor of inclusion. I rolled my used napkin in my left fist and raised the other hot dog to my mouth—then I saw the dog out of the corner of my eye, still beneath my bench, and I froze. It was staring at me, its eyes tiny slits. I stepped forward and stumbled, just a bit, and dropped the hot dog onto the cement.

My mouth opened, but no noise emerged. The condiments splattered against the hot ground and I hated the dog, hated the little man, and hated myself for wasting those precious dollars. I bent and scooped the hot dog up with the used napkin and marched to the nearest trash can. I looked directly at the dog when

I dropped the hot dog into the can: if I wasn't eating, neither was that mutt.

I didn't return to the park for two days. I hated the dog. The first day, I went to the art museum instead, but once there, I felt suffocated and paranoid. I bought a very hot coffee from the cafeteria and was yelled at by the security guard for attempting to enter an exhibit with it. I looked down into the scalding liquid—the sugar and milk swirled and swirled, and when I tried to chug it, it burned my tongue. The aftertaste wasn't hazelnut, as advertised, but liquid sugar and a hint of vanilla. I threw it away and shuffled around the big, empty rooms with my eyes to the ground. I hated the security guard and my over-priced coffee and most of all, I hated the dog.

I hated the security guard and my over priced coffee and most of all, I hated the dog.

I don't ask for much, just a dry bench and old women in floral tops. I left the museum and walked seven blocks home, but it rained a little so I jogged the rest of the way to my apartment. Once there I stripped to my underwear and sat on my bed and cried. The second day, I went out to lunch alone and found that watching lovers eat together did nothing for my appetite. The café was packed with small, round tables, and no matter where I sat, I was watching people fall in and out of love. The girl at the counter stared at her phone and twisted her hair around her fingers—it reminded me of honey and I almost smiled. I poured sugar into my coffee, sipped, and realized it was cinnamon. I resisted the urge to spit the liquid onto my lap. I felt the cinnamon coat my tongue and teeth and looked around the room and hated the lovers and the barista and the dog.

The third day I returned to the park. The dog is probably dead by now, I told myself, although I felt a sliver of guilt at my nonchalant joy. The temperature dropped considerably and I resented the dog for taking away my last jacketless days at my park.

I sat on my bench. The three fat women were sitting across the way, and I took strong comfort in their floral attire. I didn't see the dog. Good, I thought, suppressing a smile.

Then I saw the woman. Her sweater was pulled tight around her and her yellow hair was a mess around her face. She was alone. She paced the space in front of me but stared at the ground. I stared at her unabashedly. Her hair, frizzy and blond, stuck out from her head in all directions, and I wondered if it was a result of the autumn wind. She glanced at her watch several times before sighing and staring at herself in a small mirror. The compact was bright pink. I stared at her and saw us going on long, intimate dates, spending the holidays together, her parents loving me, and us being wed in a small ceremony upstate.

I nodded to myself and steadied my resolve: my life was changing, all in this moment, and it had nothing to do with my old job, or my closet-sized apartment, or that damned dog.

"Excuse me? Is-um... Do you know whose dog that is? I think he's sick or something..."

My head shot upwards. The woman was several inches from the dog, pointing to it with one finger and staring at me. The skin around her eyes looked a bit swollen and her nose was red—I wondered, vaguely, if she had been crying. She smiled tentatively at me and I liked that she had big, white teeth.

The dog was nearly dead. Its tongue hung straight out of its mouth, and I could see its body shake from twenty feet away. Several people walking by slowed their pace to stare at the dog dying quietly, and it occurred to me that the thing was noble in a sad, fragile sort of way.

"I'm on hold with Animal Control... Can you get him something, please? No one else will help me..." She had her phone out now, and I watched her glance all around us, trying to meet the eyes of our decidedly disinterested peers. My stomach clenched. I wanted to be patient and considerate, suave, even, and cool her nerves before the dog stopped breathing entirely.

"Please?"

I was squatting, caught in mid-air above the bench, when she spoke again. I opened my mouth but no sound came out. The dog was still sleeping—or dying, at her feet. I saw the vulnerability and fear in her eyes and I nodded, transfixed and a little sickened by the depth of sadness in her small blue orbs.

I continued rising and walked rapidly in the other direction. I did not look at the dog. I nodded at the woman again and tried to smile, but it felt more like a grimace. I began to panic.

I started jogging the length of the park, head turning in every direction. I saw the small man selling hot dogs and I ran to him.

I came upon a vending machine and inserted two dollars. It was out of water. I cursed loudly when it refused to give me my money back. I stepped away from the machine and felt my body begin to shake. I started jogging the length of the park, head turning in every direction. I saw the small man selling hot dogs and I ran to him.

"Water and a hotdog, please," I burst, cutting in front of a small family in his line.

The man nodded and smiled, his tiny teeth gleaming yellow. I pulled a fistful of bills out of my pocket and handed them to him. It was then I noticed the other man beside him. This new man drizzled melted cheese and chili on the hot dog as the one who served me several days before grinned triumphantly—I almost screamed. But he pulled a bottle of water out of a bucket, and I grabbed a knife and suddenly I was running back to the dog, praying it was still there and the woman was gone, but also praying that was she still there, so I could prove to her that I was not a monster. I was scraping the cheese and chili off of the hot dog, trying to slice it into pieces, and I felt a fine layer of sweat on my stomach and back, and I wondered, vaguely, if people thought I looked crazy. Then the dog came into clearer vision, and I froze.

The woman was no longer there. Dammit all, I thought. I've missed my chance. I finished slicing the hot dog and stood several feet away. I did not know what to do. I put the hot dog slices on the ground and tried to tempt the dog, but he did not rise. He stared for several moments then shut his eyes.

I moved several steps closer to the dog. I took the cap off the water bottle. I realized it wasn't cold. I was a foot behind when I saw the dog's eyes creak open and I allowed myself a small smile—It's not too late. I bent to my knees and arranged the hot dog slices in a row. I touched each piece of meat tenderly—they were losing heat quickly, but I figured they were still okay for the dog to eat. I glanced around my feet—no ants. I stared at the dog and examined his ears—one had a chunk missing and suddenly I wanted nothing more than to lift the dog onto my lap. I reached forward.

I heard footsteps behind me and the woman shouted, "Oh, thank God, thank you, you got him food!" I jolted to turn and see her, and I spilled the lukewarm water down my front.

The Copy Cat

Marissa Higgins

"No thank you." His voice, robust for a man of his small stature, crackled as he spoke.

The waitress arched a single bushy eyebrow. "Well, okay." She said, backing away slowly. "You get one free refill, you know."

I'm going to get a kitten today, he wanted to explain, I'm going to get a kitten for Anne. But the waitress was pouring coffee into another man's cup, and the man was thanking her. He watched the steam rise from the other man's mug and felt envious.

"More coffee would be nice," he whispered, looking at his empty cup. My hands didn't use to shake like this, he thought, examining his calloused fingers. Carefully, he flicked a spot of dirt from beneath his thumbnail. It is going to be a good day, he thought. It is going to be a very good day.

He stood outside, and the bus rolled to a steady stop, coming up close to the curb. "Are you getting on, Sir? Sir, are you getting on?" The pregnant woman repeated, pushing her stroller back and forth, and he wondered what she was so impatient about, what the hurry was for.

"I... I don't know," he said. "Are you?"

The bus closed its doors and the pregnant woman sighed.

"Does it look like I got on? I would have gotten on, I would have loved to have gotten on, but you stood in the damn way." She adjusted her blouse and he noticed it was covered in big, bright flowers and her pants, baggy cotton, were the color of cotton candy. It's unfortunate, he thought, that her clothes are so friendly, because her face is so scrunched up.

"I'm sorry," he replied, pulling his hands out of his pockets. "I... I can make it up to you. Would you like me to carry your baby?" He raised his arms and the woman scowled.

"Fuck off," she spat and darted into the crowd.

It's just as well, he reasoned to himself, as he strode the sidewalk to 34th street. That stroller might have been dirty and I can't muck up my hands, he thought, pulling his hands in and out of his pockets to inspect his skin. I can't muck up my hands before I see Anne.

"Some change, Sir? Some change?" It was not the rattle of the can but the rattle in the man's voice which caused him to hesitate in his stride, one faded brown boot hovering above the cement a second too long.

"I'm trying to get a meal tonight, Sir, do you have some change? Pennies will do Sir, pennies..."

"I want change too," he replied excitedly and pulled out his own two hands. "Today is a day of change." He leaned close the other man and whispered loudly. "Today I am going to get a kitten for Anne, and everything will be better."

They glided through the sidewalks and he kept stride with the other man, grinning at all those who passed them. "I'm going to get a kitten today,"

The man pulled his overcoat closer around himself and looked back and forth up the sidewalk. "A kitten? I know a man who can get you a kitten..."

Today is a good day, he thought, gripping his hands tight inside his pockets. Today is a perfect day. They glided through the sidewalks and he kept stride with the other man, grinning at all those who passed them. "I'm going to get a kitten today," he repeated and the man nodded, grinning back at him.

"This guy I know, Joe, he has the best kittens in the city. Do you know what I mean by that? The best kittens... you'd have to go all the way out to Queens to find better kittens than these kittens, you know what I mean?" His teeth were yellow, the man noticed, and he had dried blood on his bottom lip.

"Anne lives downtown now," he explained, his voice trembling with excitement. "Anne lives downtown with her roommate. She leaves at 8:24 AM to get onto the 2 and then she goes all the way to 42nd street. She goes to the big, big building on the corner of 40th and 6th. You know which one I mean? It's all gray with big glass windows and guards in suits in the front. Sometimes, when there's not a lot of people on the side walk, she goes to her favorite stand and gets a hot coffee." He paused. "I don't know what she puts in her coffee, though. I can't get close enough to see."

"Ah... I see."

"Where are the kittens?" The man burst, suddenly exasperated. He looked down at his hands – they were out of his pockets! People everywhere, people walking by, people sitting on the curb. There was dirt everywhere. He froze and stared sharply at his companion. His large overcoat had flecks of dust and there were safety pins in place of buttons. His eyes, big and brown, looked tired. One of them was swollen.

"I don't know what she puts in her coffee, though. I can't get close enough to see."

"Your kittens will be dirty!" He shouted, suddenly furious at the other man and at himself. *How could I be so foolish?* He thought, forming his hands into fists. I can't get Anne any kitten, I can't get Anne a dirty kitten.

"Hey now, hey," the other man said, slowly putting up his palms and stepping back. "If you don't want my help, fine. Just... Just maybe..."

But he was gone. His boots hit the pavement and he thought about the way his joints compacted in his knees, his hips, and his neck. I could miss a step and kill myself, he thought, and the idea excited him. But not yet, not before I get a kitten for Anne.

Most New Yorkers were surprised at the warmth of that Tuesday afternoon in late October. Autumn's tender chill disappeared for a day, leaving the pragmatic half of the city overdressed in their overcoats, while the ladies of 5th Avenue dipped ahead into Spring fashion, to bare their midriffs and painted toes. The man's neck burned with sweat but he did not remove his jacket. I can't get my hands dirty on the zipper; he told himself, trying to ignore the soggy cotton melted into his lower back.

He walked into a pet store, and approached the counter. "Hello, how are you? Do you sell kittens? May I hold one of your kittens?" He spoke quickly, yet quietly. The disinterested sales person nodded slowly, not making eye contact. People these days never look me in the eye, the man thought, shifting his weight

from side to side. Everything's changed, now.

"Yeah, they're this way." The clerk said, and the man guessed he was about twenty. His face, still coated with baby fat, also shone with a thin layer of sweat.

"They should air condition this store for you, it's too hot out, it's not right," the man said, darting his eyes as though searching for a manager to complain to.

"Uh, yeah, it is pretty warm today." The boy offered and he gestured vaguely to the row of kittens. "Do you want a certain breed or anything? They're all here..." The cages were bright red and the man walked up to them, sticking his face into the tiny wires. The kittens were quieter than he expected, most curled into balls and stacked up on top of each other.

"If it weren't for their bellies, you'd think they were dead!" The man shouted, grinning at the store boy.

"If it weren't for their bellies, you'd think they were dead!" The man shouted, grinning at the store boy. He liked the store boy. He decided the boy was a good employee and a good person. He was a much better person than the man on the sidewalk. He was going to give him a kitten to give to Anne and it was going to be a very good day.

The boy nodded. "Yeah... So uhm, is it for your daughter or something? Have you like, had a cat before or anything?"

Oh, silly me, I explained nothing to him, the man thought, unable to stop his grin from stretching to his cheekbones. "It's for Anne, son, the kitten is for Anne." He pulled his hands out of his pockets and clapped excitedly. "Which one is your favorite, son? I trust you. I trust you completely. Just remember, it has to be your favorite, because it's for Anne."

The boy pulled a large ring of keys from his belt. "Let me just uh, let me just uh step in there and I'll pull some out for you to play with," the boy said, but the man noticed the boy was taking a long time to find the correct key. They're very complicated keys, the man reassured himself, admiring the noble way in which the boy inspected each one before refusing it.

"Is it that one, son? Is it the large gold one there at the end?" The man offered, taking his hands from the wire cage. "Maybe I can try one? I can help you, if you need it."

"Uh, actually, hold on just one second, I'm going to find uh... Joe, I'm gonna find Joe real quick," the boy mumbled, and the man was shocked to see a glint of something he couldn't identify in the boy's eyes. Fear? Distrust? Cynicism?

No, you're projecting, the man told himself. He simply doesn't want to see his favorite kitten go.

A man stepped out from the back. "Sir? Hello, my name is Joseph Kummings, and I'm the manager here at The Copy Cat. We're actually closing for today, so we won't have time to make a sale. Would you like to come back tomorrow?" The manager, a portly man of about forty, had a crooked smile that the man did not trust.

"I need to get a kitten for Anne," the man repeated, and he heard his voice far away, in a world he had never been, and it was deep and it was loud and he had a bad feeling if Anne were in the store, she would be very afraid.

The manager nodded, wiping sweat from his brow with the back of his chubby hand. "I'm sorry, Sir, we aren't making any more sales today. Perhaps you can come back tomorrow, with Anne? We open at 10 AM."

They're going to keep all of the kittens. They won't let you touch one, not a single one. You'll never get a kitten for Anne here. The man felt his chest expand and he tried to count the number of breaths he was taking, in and out, in and out, until his lungs pulled tight like the skin on his face, stretched so taut his smile ached.

"Anne? Anne! Anne, come quickly, we must get your kitten," he said, wondering why his voice was barely projecting – Anne wasn't stopping, and he was going to lose her in the crowd.

Dead Before I Died

Toni Noe

I was seventeen when I graduated high school, nineteen when I moved out, and twenty six when I got married. I was thirty one when my love died and still thirty one when I became depressed. I was thirty two when I couldn't put the bottle down and thirty three when I hit Jackson, the neighbor's son, with my car. I was thirty four when I went to jail, forty one when my brother first visited me, and seventy two when I started to write this memoir confessing my sins. My skin is now wrinkled, at the feeble age of seventy five, and my life has been a never ending series of erroneous dreams and recollections of one blurry and drunken decade.

I wore a knee length white lace dress to my wedding. I had brown hair down to my belly button and flowers caught in the curls. His name was Truman and his beard took over three fourths of his face. His finger nails were always clean and his eye lashes felt nice against my cheeks. He was my heart and soul. My better half. My one and only. My Truman. He vowed to love me until the day we were both buried deep in the ground but always told me that he would continue to love my dirty bones even after that.

Truman's life ended when he was thirty three years old. Cancer slowly took over his fragile figure, and he left my life faster than a star shooting across our California sky. My life crashed down all around me. My once cement walls turned to crumbled pieces of nothingness and buried me. I turned to alcohol

and hated God for taking my light. I spent every day in our home and cursed the world. Nothing made sense, and it got to the point where I didn't want anything to make sense. It was easier to be mad. It made sense to be mad.

Jackson had brown curly hair and big doe eyes. He wore striped sweaters and held his mother's hand when she walked him to the bus every morning for kindergarten. He had a golden retriever named Cooper that never left the fenced in yard and a cat who occasionally got stuck in the tree, resulting in multiple visits from the fire truck, which was nothing less than pure excitement on Jackson's part. Jackson was five years old when he got his first bicycle and six years old when he snuck out of the house at midnight to ride it up and down the dark and empty neighborhood streets.

I was out of alcohol fifteen minutes before the local liquor store closed. The clerk asked me if I wanted a ride home, and I shook my head "no" and stumbled into the driver's seat. It was approximately twelve thirty when I heard the thud. His curls were mangled and his innocent cheek bones were concealed by blood. My cries were slurred, and his mother and father's were of pure horror.

Jackson spent three years in a coma and was nine years old when his life line went flat. He died on a hospital bed with tubes up his nose and white sheets on his pale skin. His fingers were manually linked into his mother's and her tears created a pool on his chest. I was thirty seven when the prison guard handed me a phone that had my lawyer on the other line. He told me in a stern and monotone voice that Jackson's short lived life was officially over.

I was seventy one when I started speaking again. And it took years after that to actually formulate enough letters and words to write this all down. It has taken heaps of energy and tears. It has taken everything out of me, just like I did to Jackson. I took his life. I took his youth and innocence and everything that he could have experienced. I took everything that he could have been, and I snatched it all up for no reason other than the fact that I was sad. I was alone and haunted and selfish. I will remember Jackson like I remember Truman. Young, honest, bold, and beautiful. Beautiful in the most perfect form of the word. Lovely in the truest possible way.

I will live with my guilt until my dying day. My fingers will continually shake until my blood runs dry, and my heart will reside over Jackson's tombstone until I can apologize to him myself. I will mentally shower his family with flowers and curse every single step I took after Truman's death. Maybe someday when I'm seventy seven or seventy eight, when my skin is longer, my hair is grayer, my heart is weaker, my mind is slower, and when I run out of different ways to say "I'm sorry," I will mail this to Jackson's poor parents.

Default Mode Network

Evan Arndt

Andrew's wall is the same color as his ceiling, and as much as he has tried to cover it up with posters and pictures and other little scraps of his life, he knows that the blank white is waiting for him underneath it. It is nothinging at him from beneath push-pinned Polaroids and his cheap copy of Starry Night. It never bothers him during the day, but once he lies down in bed, once he starts trying to fall asleep, the wall's unrelenting sameness is all he can see. Taught, his eyelids will not stay closed, and as his brain tires of the cranking work of depth perception the blank-white of his ceiling descends. He cannot lay on his bed and look at the floor. The window is out of view, and the walls offer only their hopeless sameness. Out of necessity then, out of practice, with effort, he closes his eyes.

If over-unity devices were ever to have existed in this world they would have been discovered long after Bhaskara's Wheel failed to spin, in the year 1481, six years after the invention of muzzle loaded rifles and four years before DiVinci designed the first parachute. They would be big and clanky with large iron gears and levers. Some Italian renaissance man would have all his friends over and pull the large velvet curtain back and throw his weight behind the big crank. A skeptical crowd of furrowed brows would murmur as the hulking machine's first big gear would move a slightly smaller one, acting on a pulley system which in turn acted on a series of weights. The watchers' eyes would follow the causes

and effects and land back on the big gear and crank in the middle, all doing the math in their heads—

There is a man yelling in the street outside Andrew's apartment window. Something un-urgent, like a goodnight-sound, expanded—flung wide open—by alcohol. Andrew's fan is on full, moving the hot air around his room, but neither the breeze nor the white noise brings him any closer to sleep. If he owned a place, he could paint. He had painted a wall in his bedroom when he was eleven. Just one, but it was completely up to him. His parents had granted him autonomy: any color he wanted with the caveat that he was responsible; it was his project. His own. He would have to tape and sand, prepare the wall for the color; be careful to lay drop-cloths down and paint in long even strokes, like this, this, his dad showed him, his large man's hand over Andrew's tiny nubile one.

The inventor's hands crank the machine slow, starting at eye level and pushing up, up, up, all the way above his head to down low below his knees. The thing would clang and cough and all the pieces would begin to move, one cog falling into the next. After one rotation it would be alive, but slow. The second time 'round and he would pick up speed, straining his body against the weight of the secrets of physics and energy and by the third he could lift his hands off it for a perfect moment. One breath. In, out.

The thing would clang and cough and all the pieces would begin to move, one cog falling into the next.

A fourth time for good measure and he would step back, having to dodge the crank, now spinning on its own accord. And here would come the great anticlimax of the machine. The inventor would stand in silence beside it. His contemporaries would hold their beards in thoughtful skepticism. All would wait for it to stop.

But it wouldn't.

Andrew, years ago, painted his bedroom wall blue. A dark green-blue that sucked you into it. You would open the door, and the room being wide and shallow, it was as if you were hovering above some deep reservoir, stretching farther left and right than your arms could reach to catch, to save you. Like falling down a well, the wall gave you a brief sense of panic and serenity. But then you would remember which way gravity goes and breathe a sigh of relief. Andrew didn't understand that feeling, but held onto it dreadfully when he could. After it passed he found no way of explaining it, but always tried to anyway. "Like the thinnest, longest line that could kill you if it passed through your head and you wouldn't feel a thing," he would say, "like perfect shapes that never stop moving

in, like, perfect repeating patterns." These things were beautiful and terrifying to Andrew, but not as terrifying as the loneliness in his inability to explain them. "High towers, so high you can't breathe at the top, but you climb anyway, you want to because your little brother or your mom is up there." But it was no use.

News would spread across the towers of Europe and machines would spring up at their roots, some trying to duplicate the first, some to discredit it. Within a matter of years every town square would have one, running a clock in Nuremburg, pulling a buggy around a track in Naples, running a carousel painted with the Tudor coat of arms in London. Farmers in the country would build them to grind wheat. Out in the fields you could hear the clanking for miles as they heaved groundwater up from the earth.

The advent of electricity would decrease the size of the machines and when Raytheon releases its first living-room unit with its pastel blue plastic casing in 1963, they sell one to every home in America. "Tired of unsightly gears and metal?" the advertisements would ask, "Sick of being kept awake by your energy machine at night?" The frustrated housewife nods into the television camera. "Well, have we got a product for you!"

Andrew once put his knee through his blue wall. His bed was lofted. He was chilly in the night because his blanket had slipped down over the edge. Even asleep, Andrew knew he had long arms. The blanket was just out of reach. Andrew reached and reached, and began climbing down the ladder upside-down, supported by his hands. Next to the blue wall, there were now stoic Indian women where once the surprised faces of his electrical outlets sat.

Their quietness and unobtrusiveness would lead us to forget them and, over time, take them for granted. The children who grew up in homes with the plastic boxes would not open them, or ask to open them. The light bulb's light comes from the box in the corner.

For a moment, Andrew is not falling, or leaning, but completely suspended in space by one arm.

Reaching and reaching, Andrew became awake to the sensation that the world was not as he perceived it. What should have been up was not up. Down was not down. He felt his balance move in his middle, and slowly pull him from the ladder. For a moment, Andrew is not falling, or leaning, but completely suspended in space by one arm. For this moment (One breath. In, out.), Andrew holds the entire world up. Atlas is not so strong and scared as Andrew in this moment.

All of Andrew's arms and legs landed at different times and made a loud

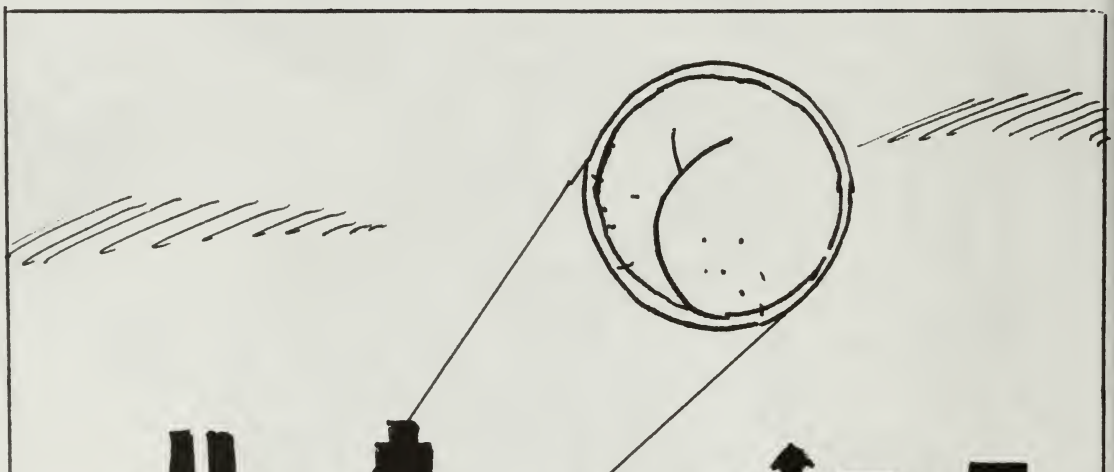
crash. He found himself upside down on top of his blanket. One knee smarting, having punctured the drywall. A beautiful oval hole with white edges and only darkness in its center. Now, Andrew, in bed with his ceiling leaning down over him, remembers learning to patch the dry wall. Taping, mudding, sanding, mudding, sanding, sanding, and finally painting (again). But it was impossible to match the dark color of the original coat. The lighter, newer paint stood out against the rest and ruined the illusion of the well-wall—well, just a wall now. Might as well be painted white.

Andrew dreams that he would be the kind of person that would want to take a screwdriver to the tightly sealed corners of the Raytheon box. He dreams that he would drive out into the Great Plains until he found a mound of rusted metal grown dead by rain and wind and mud. He dreams that he would take a crowbar and a blowtorch to it. That he would beat the rust off of it in the right places. That he would know which scrap of metal to scar to which in order to make the ugly thing breathe again.

Andrew dreams, almost asleep, that in his t-shirt in the blazing Midwest sun, he would throw his back into the ancient crank and heave it round once, twice, three times until the machine clanked happily away, and then hop back into his car and drive off without the radio on, listening to rhythm of the clanking, knowing that would go and go, maybe forever.

The Unpublishables

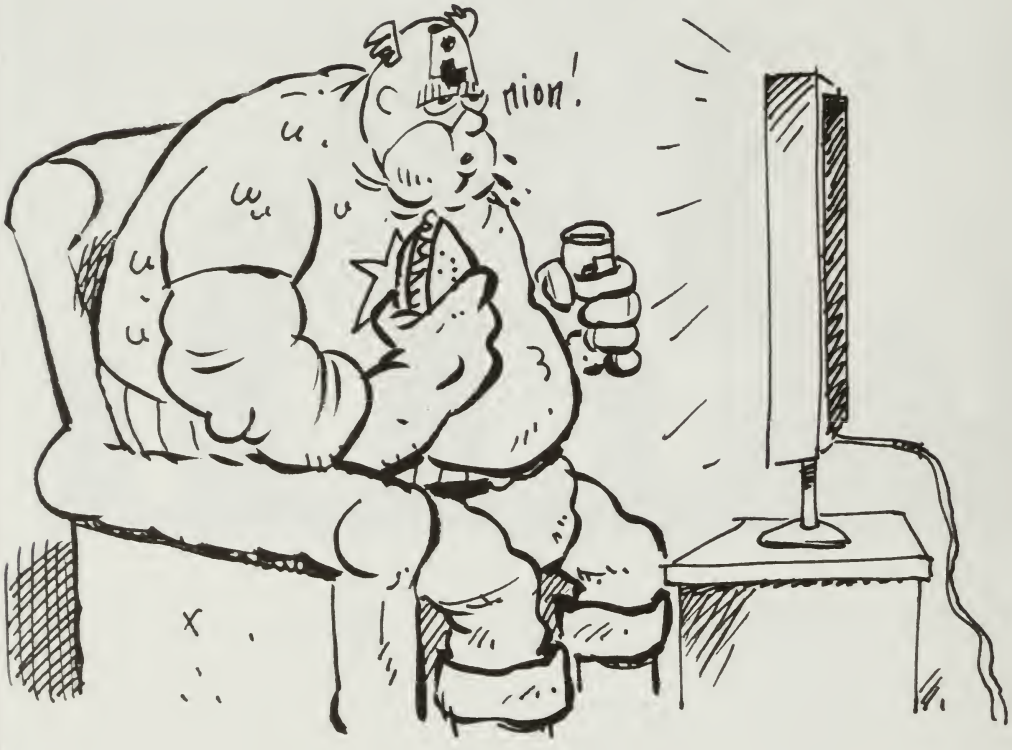
Sylvain Delzant

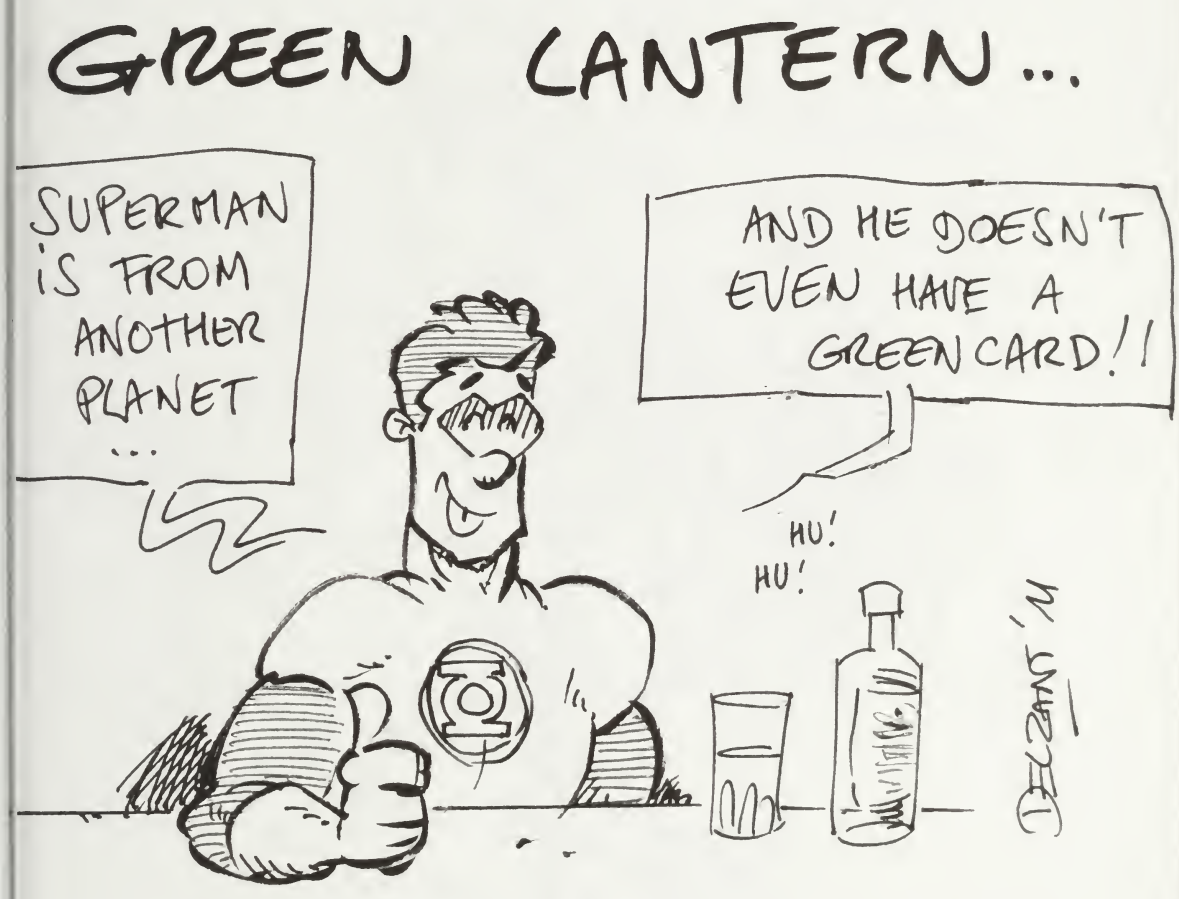


THE BUTT SIGNAL...

?!
THE COOL
NTM
JIMMY
DELZANT '92

CAPTAIN NORTH AMERICA...




GREEN LANTERN...
SUPERMAN IS FROM ANOTHER PLANET ...
AND HE DOESN'T EVEN HAVE A GREEN CARD!!
HU!
HU!
DELZANT '11

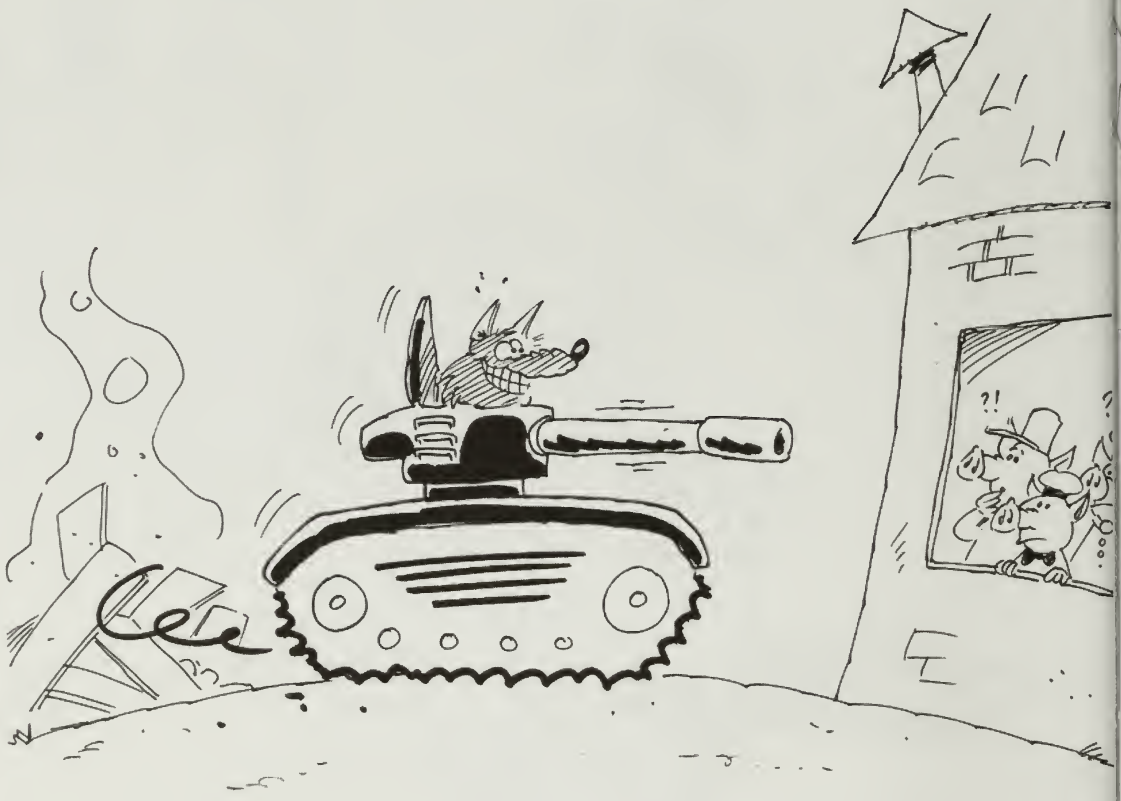
OOCH!
"AÏE
ARG!

IRON MAN

SPIDERMAN HAS FARTED AGAIN...

I HAVE
ALWAYS
WANTED TO BE
ELEPHANT-MAN
!!

THE TICK IN PARIS...
@☆!!*
DECARLO '10



I'M STONED!
4

MANUCURE

Joanne N. Michaud

Time

Time is under while money is over rated
Gets learned once one experiences hatred
The time with him or her felt as if u wasted
Love only built so high, to get faded?! [fade voice on "to get faded"]
Degraded? Everything in life we gotta upgrade it [spike volume on "Degraded]
Anger somewhere in da mix got created [hulk voice, screaming/grunting]
For another u wished u neva waited
Well take this as if you a waiter-waitress
And my lyrics is your 20 percent tip
But it's worth is a life time tip
you can make a dime and end up with a penny
you can spend a penny and end up with a dime
but can't spend time and then hit rewind
Time equals experience divided by people
We go through life spending little by little time with multiple individuals
dealing with btw crucial and beautiful
way you spend your time be careful
you could look back with a hair full
of grey why I aint live life this way then
Regret hops on da train and stops at your brain
Bad thoughts cycle but don't seem to get recycled
And from your mind never seems to really fade
This from your mind never let it fade
Even though in life this aint how it's portrayed
Money is over while time is under rated

Kelsie Leonard

The Bird

Part One

I found your small black form
yesterday.
It was so still and quiet.

You lay face down near
the waters edge, neck crooked,
eyes clouded.

You are not my maimed darling,
my skittery pigeon,
but I could love you the same way.

Your flightless wings bent so
unnaturally, laying useless on
the cold stones.

I want to lift you off this
horizontal headstone, breathe
new life into your limp frame.

You are not my maimed darling,
my skittery pigeon,
but I could love you the same way.

I want to scoop you up,
hold your decomposing
body close to me until
you feel warm again.

But I know I can't save you
that way.
So I will take you
the way you are,
broken but not worthless.
I will let nature take what
I can't keep,
and when in the spring
you are only naked bones

I will hold you again and
love you the same way

Part Two

I went to see you again,
Darling.

I went to see you, still sleeping
near the water.
Your feathers rotting, neck
still crooked.

I came to get you, came
to take you away, to hide
you.

I came to collect your
bones.
Your bones,
that I saved,
so I can love you.

You are not my maimed darling,
my skittery pigeon.
But I could love you the same way.

I lifted you, Precious,
and your neck drooped.
Your middle was bloated,
filled with rancid insides.
I held you.

In a blue plastic bag,
I carried your
dead weight.
But I have you now, Darling,
and in the spring when you are
only those naked white bones

I will love you the same way.

Part Three

Darling,
I thought about you today
and my heart ached.

Laying beneath the cold dirt
bent, crooked, sleeping
with your mouth open.

Your feathers, your insides,
they make a mound under the soil.
My chest is tight, Dearest:
I miss you.

I could cry to hold your bones,
your putrefying body, soft.
I am so desperate to clean
away your molding flesh.

So desperate
to hold your
naked bones, Beloved.

You are not my maimed darling,
my skittery pigeon, but
I will love you the same way.

Part Four

I dug in the soil today,
and the smell of wet earth
filled my hands.

I scraped back your blanket,
and there, unmoved, I found
You.

I found your wing.
Your sternum.
Your hip.
Your glorious white ribs.

Oh, my heart swelled, Beloved,
I could feel the heat
in my chest at the sight of you.

I have waited for this,
that it is spring now.

Waited to peel away
what is decayed, brush
away the maggots.

I have waited to see you,
to know your naked
white bones.

I have waited
and know that
I must love you

the same way now.

Allister Quilon

Strange Meeting

We're not enemies,
Just ordinary people in a
Strange situation.
We were friends once
But now we're just passing, catching
Different trains at the same station.

Jerimiah Bergstrom

Roadside Flowers

But I never saw them
In full- only a hook,
A tickle and draw to the right.
They whisper, flit and
Run from me, even though it's
I who stalks away from them.

And after all, it's only on
The way, either to or from a
Somewhere, and neither of those leave
Me time to stop and smell
The Flowers. But there they
Always were, that wafting lash

Of honey on early bread
Or sugar turning darken in the pan.
Until, last week, wrapped
In young November blust,
I made my normal way to
And for them, but found them

Tinted, tainted with the sour
Sap of time, their secret inner
Honey dried by autumnal
Gusts, and I think of monuments
To Pharaohs and of insect husks:
A carpet of the dead to nurse anew
That cold and wounded Kore.

There is another, smaller
Patch, just further down the road.
Still alive, clinging to the memory
Of warmth. And they're the ones I
Seem to catch my eye upon, but they
Smell nothing of molasses, or
Heated apples drifting through the kitchen.

Toni Noe

Nashville in My Pockets

As I turned to a blank page
All of the leaves and flowers dropped onto my lap
The ones I collected on our long adventures
Stuffed into my back pockets

The leaves that once belonged to trees we had never seen before
In a city we had never explored before
In a new world we had never entered before

The leaves that I thought were pretty
The leaves that coincidentally matched your eyes

The flowers that once were rooted in thick grass we had never seen before
Grass we had never been able to let our toes touch before
In lands we had never delved into before

The flowers that my father calls weeds
The flowers that I picked and stuck in my hair, right behind my left ear

The crinkle of the dry leaves
The euphonious sound
A melody on it's own
Holding an abode in my heart

The feel of the deceased flower
The flocculent touch
Causing palpitations in my core
Reserving a sentiment in my finger tips

As I turned to a blank page
All of my memories dropped onto the paper
The ones I collected on our long adventures
Stuffed into my back pockets

Jillian Goss

Downhill Brittany

Ingredients: Crystal Meth

Warning: side effects may include nausea, dizziness, hallucinations, intense diarrhea, you may even feel like Steven Philips, who last week asked me if I would fuck him in the back of his mom's minivan, meaning you will have a seriously overactive sex drive and a seriously overactive imagination, you may also think that you're better than everyone else (like my mother or my sister) or that you're better than me (everyone is), you may also experience genetic dysfunction, being that you may spontaneously change physical sex, you may become infertile, or very fertile, you may grow a second row of teeth in your mouth, you may black out for several days without having to spend all of your money on alcohol, your hair may shrink into your head, your hair may migrate to your chest, your hair may do your chores, your fingers may fall off, or you may grow some extra fingers (albeit not on your hands), you may no longer be able to see attractive members of the opposite sex, you may try to kill yourself by repeatedly slamming your head in the front door (unfortunately it doesn't work…).

Alex Rodríguez

Vanilla Ice Cream

For My Ex-Girlfriend Kaitlynn

Vanilla Ice Cream
That was the title of the song you left on my iPod
And what you had for dinner more often than you probably should have.
Little things like that are what I miss about you the most.

I brought you home, and at first you were sweet.
I loved the taste of vanilla.
But as time went on your surface hardened and froze
After a while I couldn't even get my spoon inside you.

Every week we would lie together on your bed and just hold each other
It was like vanilla ice cream, boring. All I wanted to do was get up and go out
My friends would call me every week to try to pull me away from your cold grasp
And as much as I wanted to go out and live, I stayed with you. Frozen.

I stayed there thinking you would always be there for me
But you're not. And it's my fault.
I shattered you, scraped away the pieces, and thought I would never miss you.
Until you found that other guy.

I had forgotten what life without love was like.
I thought I would be free.
But what I hadn't realized was that once the ice was gone
My heart would be left to melt, and drop by drop cry its way out of me.

There was no sense behind my feelings
And I could not understand what I thought I knew
Your skin was vanilla white, a ghost among my caramel friends
And now that you're gone, you still haunt the same places

A funny thing happens when you stop eating ice cream
The extra weight just falls right off
And your body becomes even stronger than it was before.
I learned so much from you.

Thank you for the lessons you taught me,
Patience, understanding, and selflessness.
Now get the fudge out of my head.

Kevin Figueroa

for now

We are here
for now
and
(we sit (here) and be-lie-eve
to ourselves as We
search for
se arch for
search for li(f)e in
chalk b oard /
dust/screech
:trees do not burst forth
from artificial greens

&we
are not Moth(er)s
fluttering in the light
giving birth to Spring
although
(t)here is life,
ensnared in the wings
we try to grow

but the sk y is c-loud-y
with babybluebirdand
maybe cottondoves –
no place for man
:so groun-de(a)d and
black&white
; ever so inanimate and
enslaved by gravity
) until the end,
silent as the
love-(m) aching of
air
and
lungs

Midori Gleason

Dear Martha,

I just wanted you to know I no longer hold a grudge so there is no reason
we can't move on. Our phone call cancels those packages sent home
to me. I read your handwriting saying "Return to sender" on the front,
in red. It's all over now. You won and I can't keep us in some eternal feud. Enough
is enough. There was a time I believed we shared some peculiar
honesty, some rare understanding -- that's why I'm invested
in telling you this story about a vest.
I was in a store in January and I saw this navy blue vest. A little pricey but even you
would have been impressed by its straight lines, no-nonsense craftsmanship. Except
then this thought held me in its grip: Why should I care that you
would have liked it? On second thought, it might have been your style
more than mine. I stalled at the rack for a while, fingering the fabric to ascertain
how genuine my attraction all along had been. I considered if I should read it a sign
that despite your crimes, there never was a time better suited to forgive,
heal our rift -- Ought I to purchase the vest as a gift?
I rung up the vest and smiled at the cashier, then scurried back
to wait at the station. Did I mention it was bitching cold and the green line
is famously slow? I glanced at the bag
holding the vest then pulled it out and over me. I confess
it fit beautifully and the insulation astounded me
so much I left the station to return to the store.
Why sacrifice? For twice the price I could be twice as nice.
Dressing us up as if we were twins really showed the compassionate mood I was in.
I wore one and carried the other until I made it to my final walk uphill, then decided
as a temporary measure, to double them up -- Remember, about the weather.
Martha, I suddenly saw I was a fool to make such a fuss about one
who's always been cruel, conniving and selfish, and justly
distrustable too. I've kept your wool vest and, now, I have two.

Sincerely,
From one who tried to make amends, but then,
In the end, decided she'd rather not be friends.

Midori Gleason

Gangster Tabby

Across the street on
the corner of a duplex's porch,
an orange Tabby always sprawls by the rail
where the sun slices shadows from the scorch.
He unfurls, never twitches his tail
or lifts his head as a woman in slippers
Slips past the screen without a glance.
I pause by him on the sidewalk. His ears
have been torn to strips. His face, in places
tufted gray. His hungry eyes and ribcage
suggest when I heard aluminum cans crash
in the night, along with feline hiss-screeches,
he was among those gangsters fighting for trash.

Seeing me standing tender, he creeps to my feet,
nuzzles his head, as if I have something to eat.

Midori Gleason

Sestina for Botox

I'll pardon grays but when I see the mirror
-- I'm not ashamed -- I'm afraid of lines
creasing my brow. When did these crevices form?
Bastard born, they'll tattle my untold years,
Snitch she's woman born and then, she'll die.
These lines deny lies that I perfect.

Each line must be rehearsed to perfect
a scene, yet young skin bares before the mirror,
rears her derriere, prepared to die.
Since Time won't step in to narrate, her unsaid lines
stay undefined. The curtain calls for years
to watch her nubile bare body perform.

In Plato's cave there is no ideal form.
The shadow stage just reflects the perfect.
But I'm still chained against this wall for years.
In here, all that's clear is my face in the mirror,
aspiring towards glossy pages, and lines
advertising BUY! BE LOVED! DON'T DIE!

I'm not afraid to die. I will not die
while these cross hatched lines dare deform
me -- I'll write poems for Botox -- These lines
will pay my way to inject and perfect,
so character defects deflect the mirror,
selectively imprint remaining years.

Narcissus' tragedy streams years
to preachy-teach that if you're vain you'll die
in your reflection. O if only my mirror,
like his, would soothe rather than inform
me of what I need to perfect.
If only soft ripples drew their lines...

Who says I ought to go on towing lines
about how aesthetics change with years,
show a beauty that surpasses perfect?
You do it. Since we all must die
I won't be tied to pride. I'll transform.
Be coy, keep a secret from my mirror.

I can't go back, reform a perfect life
or count my years and flaws until I die.
I can erase lines. Lie to the mirror.

Melinda Taylor

How Did This Happen?

How did this happen?
I can't believe how much things have changed
How did this happen?
That I could feel such a range
Of feelings and emotions
It's all so amazing and strange
As if my heart, mind and soul are an ocean
Overflowing with something real and intense
How did this happen?
One day I only feel platonic and it makes sense
We go out and have fun and
I have a dream
Then the next day I feel something new
Why does it seem
That my view of us and of you
Has literally changed overnight?
How did this happen?
I question whether I should fight
What I feel, question it, ignore it
Or if I should take a chance
And tell you how I feel
I'm so afraid you won't feel the same
The pain that would cause is all too real
This is my life, yours too and not a game
I love how close our friendship has become
And I hope and pray that won't ever change
Because to me you will always be someone
Who I care about, appreciate, respect, and love
How did this happen?
I really don't know
But the fact is it did so…
What do I do?
I'm new to the queer scene
And don't know how to make a move
Maybe I need to talk to more people
Help me find my groove

But it's not all about me
You have a part in this too
If I admit to you
What I feel
It will affect you too
I don't want to put any pressure on you
Who knows how you'd feel
About the age difference
Or about the reality
Of being a couple at church
And there's my family
Who pretends my queer side doesn't exist
How did this happen?
Is it meant to be?
Only God knows and we'll find out
And I ask God for the courage
To take a chance and see what we're really about.

Melinda Taylor

Pure Joy

When I think of You
I feel pure joy
Because You love me
Unconditionally
You created me
Knowing in advance
Who you wanted me
To be
You have a plan
For my life
You have always
Been there for me
Even when I
Did not know it
Or thought You
Were not
Or simply just
Somehow forgot
I pray to You
Regularly
And constantly ask
For Your guidance
In my life
I love and need You
So very much
Since life
Has been difficult
And I never know
What curveballs
It will throw at me
Without You
I would be lost
With You
I am found
Thank You Lord
For being You

And for accepting me
As I am
With all my faults
And for giving me
Gifts that I can use
For Your glory and honor
And for the
Pure joy
Of others and myself
I do not know
What the future
Has in store for me
But I know that
You do
And You will
Help me through
And that someday
I will be
The person You
Created me
To be.

Helen Tisserand

Ode to Toothpaste

"Don't forget to brush your teeth" mom said
Gooey bland strawberry banana
The older I get, the harder it is to remember you
I blister my fingers on your almost empty tube
a sarcophagus of death
like an elderly man trying to squeeze out his last bit of life
I throw you away most often before every drop is used
dirty minty flavor
unknown toothbrushes from the past
sit in a multitude in the corner of the sink
to whose ownership is unclear
some foggy nights I use you on them
I can still taste the bacteria of people who are in my life no longer.
back in the teenage years we use to have races
to see who could squirt you out fastest
and then we would lather you on our hands like mickey mouse fingers
and hold each other's hands and promise these days would never die
but they did
and with every tube of off white, bright white, translucent blues
swirls and straight lines of greens and of reds
and with your limited amount of flavors
months and years go by
and the harder it is to remember you

Class Doodles

Pat Tomaz

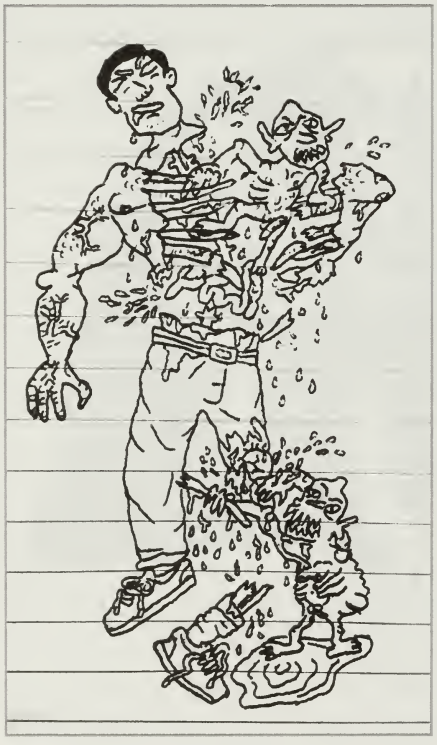
Here is a small collection of sketches I've done over the past year in class when I'm bored of listening to my professors or while I'm on a long train ride. The topics of these sketches do not represent the way I feel. People ask me why my drawings are so bizarre or disturbing and assume I'm as disturbed as what I draw, but I guess it's just the stuff my hand chooses to make.

All I ever wanted to
do was darken the day
and brighten the night
- Clive Barker

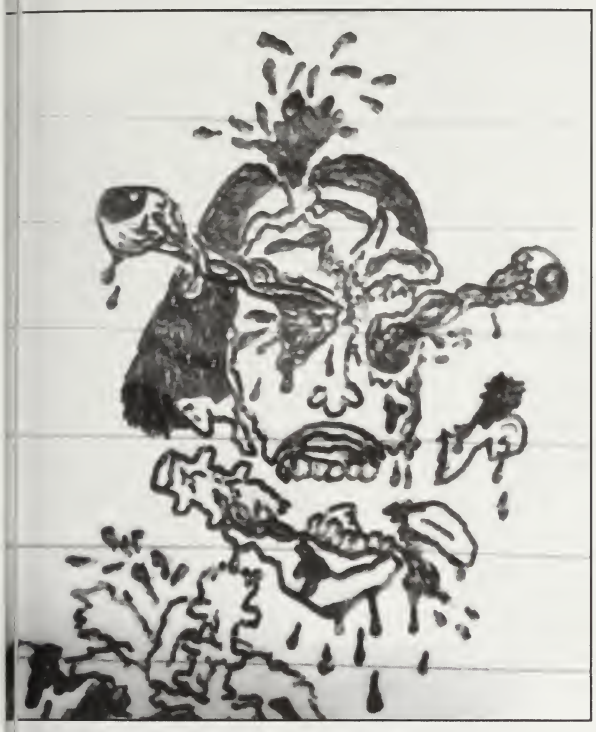
Aliens at Night

Gambling Man

Creeping Demon



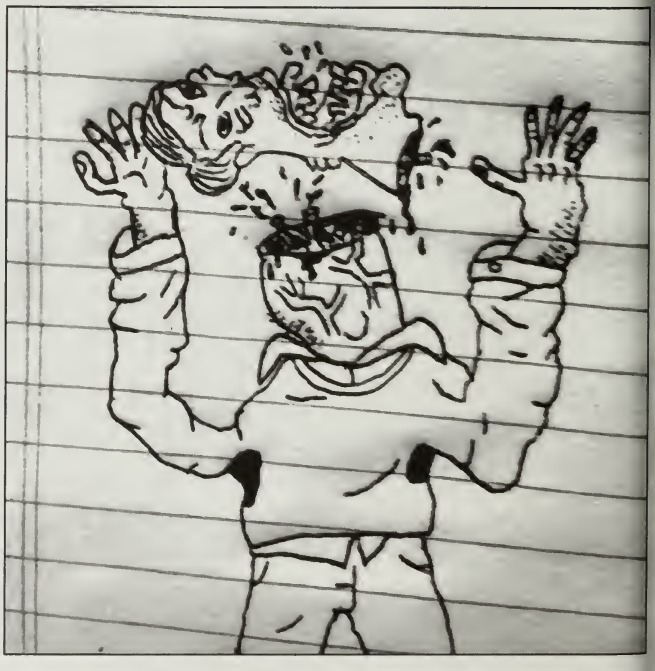
Consumed from the Inside



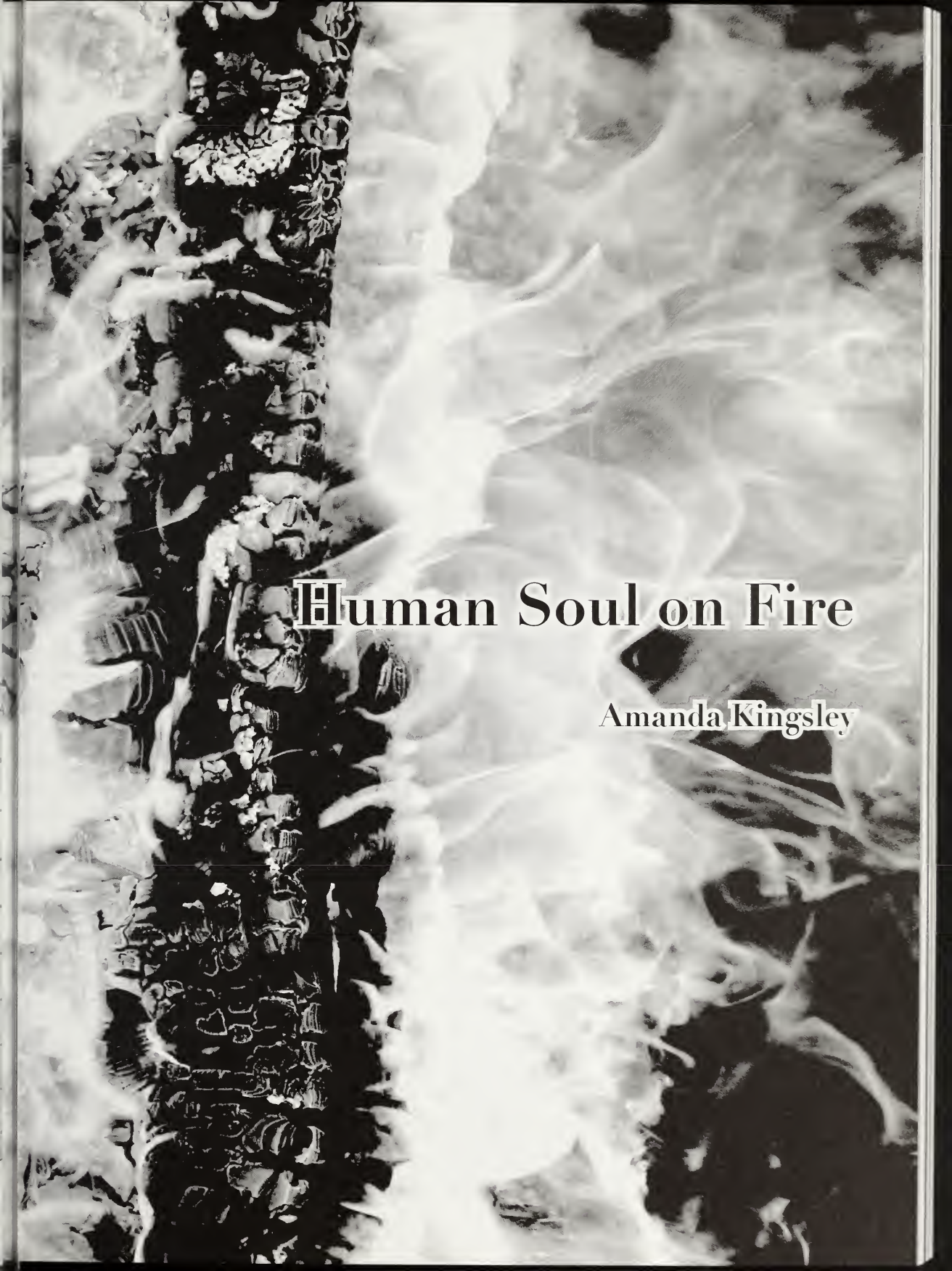
ombustion

Bad Luck

Abomination from the Woods



Decapitation



Human Soul on Fire

Amanda Kingsley

ESSAY

Wilted yellow paint chips adorn the opening of the school's large wooden doors like ceremonial flower petals at a classic Indian wedding. Silver chains coil tautly around the doors, curved iron handles like christmas wreaths, but fail to mask the stark faded painting of a large smiley face that so long ago greeted visitors. The distinct cry of dogs barking from behind the school's fastened gates is shrouded by the exchange of street vendors peddling back and forth along the cluttered street. Professor Garfield cooly strokes his tuft of graying facial hair and briskly shuffles towards an adjunct side door, triggering wisps of dirt to snake around his ankles. Upon reaching the auxiliary school entrance, a stout, pillowy woman instantaneously bursts through the door, her body engulfed in a brilliant sea of red and gold. She tilts her head back and gleefully chortles at the professor's surprised expression, then teasingly inquires as to why it has taken him so long to return to her doors. Her bright red sari tightly hugs her protruding hips and the array of wrinkles collectively bowed above her mouth are a clear ramification of her constant smiling. She implores the two of us to follow her, her sari cascading behind her as she shepherds us inside to her world.

The pungent scent of curry casually lingers in the air and seemingly seeps into every porous entity in the room. She beckons us to sit down with her on her office floor, which consequently also functions as her bedroom, dining room and living room. Her earnest, soft brown face excitedly looks between the two of us, silently seeking to decipher why the professor has guided an American student to her doors. Seeing her expression, Professor Garfield elucidates to her my germinating interest in helping disadvantaged populations.

He had hoped she would divulge her story to me, as a means of inspiration. She gazes intently at me as if to soak in my character and slowly pulls the stray wisps of black hair behind her ear and nods her head slowly. As her profound story unfolds of how the Smile school came to be. Her brow furrows and her eyes once glossy with excitement begin to puddle with sadness. She weaves a tale that unfurls, like a corpse flower, to unveil the stifling wretchedness and sadness that truly resides in each of these children lives.

All children that graciously attend the Smile school are considered untouchables by Indian society. In short, these youthful, bright-eyed children are viewed as of less importance than the dirt which coats the disconnected, winding roads of India. A majority of children stir long before the rays of the Indian sun have a chance to stain the sky and assist their parents in accumulating trash and food scraps. The modest meal they receive at school is the only one they will receive all day. The uniform which they all so proudly wear upon their delicate backs is the only article of clothing they ever owned. Rajan humbly discloses that she and her husband started this school because of their innate desire to aid the untouchable community. Rajan's school acts as a window of opportunity; presenting these children with a chance of escaping their presumably fated life of destitute. By bestowing the untouchable youth of Bod Gaya with a primary education, Rajan was breaking the shackles that society had imposed on these children since birth.

In short, these youthful, bright-eyed children are viewed as of less importance than the dirt which coats the disconnected, winding roads of India.

Although staring is deemed discourteous in Indian culture, I can not help but gaze at Rajan in awe. I enthusiastically congratulate her on her accomplishment and commend her determination to better the lives of these young children. It is only once I shower her in compliments that Rajan bows her head slightly, causing strays of loose hair to spill over her fallen face. Like a flower suddenly exposed to the chilling winter wind, her body slowly wilts forward until her face is buried in her small, padded hands. A slow, muffled sob escapes Rajan's lips which triggers her small frame to quiver. Alarmed, I glance at Professor Garfield seeking direction or guidance but he remains unperturbed, never wavering from the trembling Rajan. As if sensing my discomfort, Rajan hoisted her head from her hands to reveal her tear streaked face. Embarrassed, she straightened her back and hurriedly wiped away fresh tears with the sleeves of her vibrant red sari. But the frayed cloth failed to soak up the internal sadness that had clearly manifested in Rajan.

A recent tragedy had cast a dark shadow over the Smile school, leaving Rajan's heart heavily riddled with sorrow and unwarranted guilt. Last week, the body of one of her most promising students was found in a ditch just down the street from the school. An elderly

street vendor had found his lifeless body lying face down beside the road, his arms splayed out like a puppet suddenly snipped from its strings. His throat had been mercilessly slashed, along with his aspirations. Although he was only 13 years of age, he excelled in music and had been contacted by many renown classical Indian musicians who wished to become his mentor. Although the motivation behind his grisly murder remains unknown, it is common for untouchable families to be unjustifiably beaten or killed because of their lowly caste status. A grainy black and white photo of the once bright young boy starkly hangs in every classroom to remind every child of their beloved classmate and friend. The photo also hangs to tacitly represent the life that these children are escaping.

I silently tread into a classroom and watched as a young woman masterfully conducted a classroom of thirty, eight-year-old boys and girls. Their small heads bob up and down in a sea of eagerness, each craning their willowy necks to see the board. Provoked with a question, the classroom desks are now covered in a blanket of waving hands. Each student thrusts a hand into the air fervently as though at a silent auction. Expecting my arrival, the teacher directs their attention toward the back of the room. Their bright smiles greet me in eager anticipation. Each told the story of how they dreamed of going to college one day. Without this opportunity of receiving a higher education, they would have been begging on the streets for the rest of their lives. Like water, Raja has poured her energy and soul into helping these children, and the fruits of her labor are blooming. Their hopes and dreams are no longer defined by the caste system but by their curiosity. Upon fully attaining the impact that one woman had made on this group of children, I could no longer restrain the tears that had been so begging to fall since my arrival.

That day, my whole being seemed to have undergone an extreme transformation. A new found hunger now feverishly pulsed throughout my body that could only be extinguished with change. It is said that the most powerful force on earth is the human soul on fire. If so, mine is now permanently aflame.

Diamond

Ameerah I. Skandarani

ESSAY

Few things in life fill my heart with as much joy as the dazzling brilliance of sunlight gleaming off the sharply defined edges of an exquisitely rendered diamond. Four days a week I fixate on the freshly drawn lines as I lace up my cleats, and I just can't keep the smile from my lips.

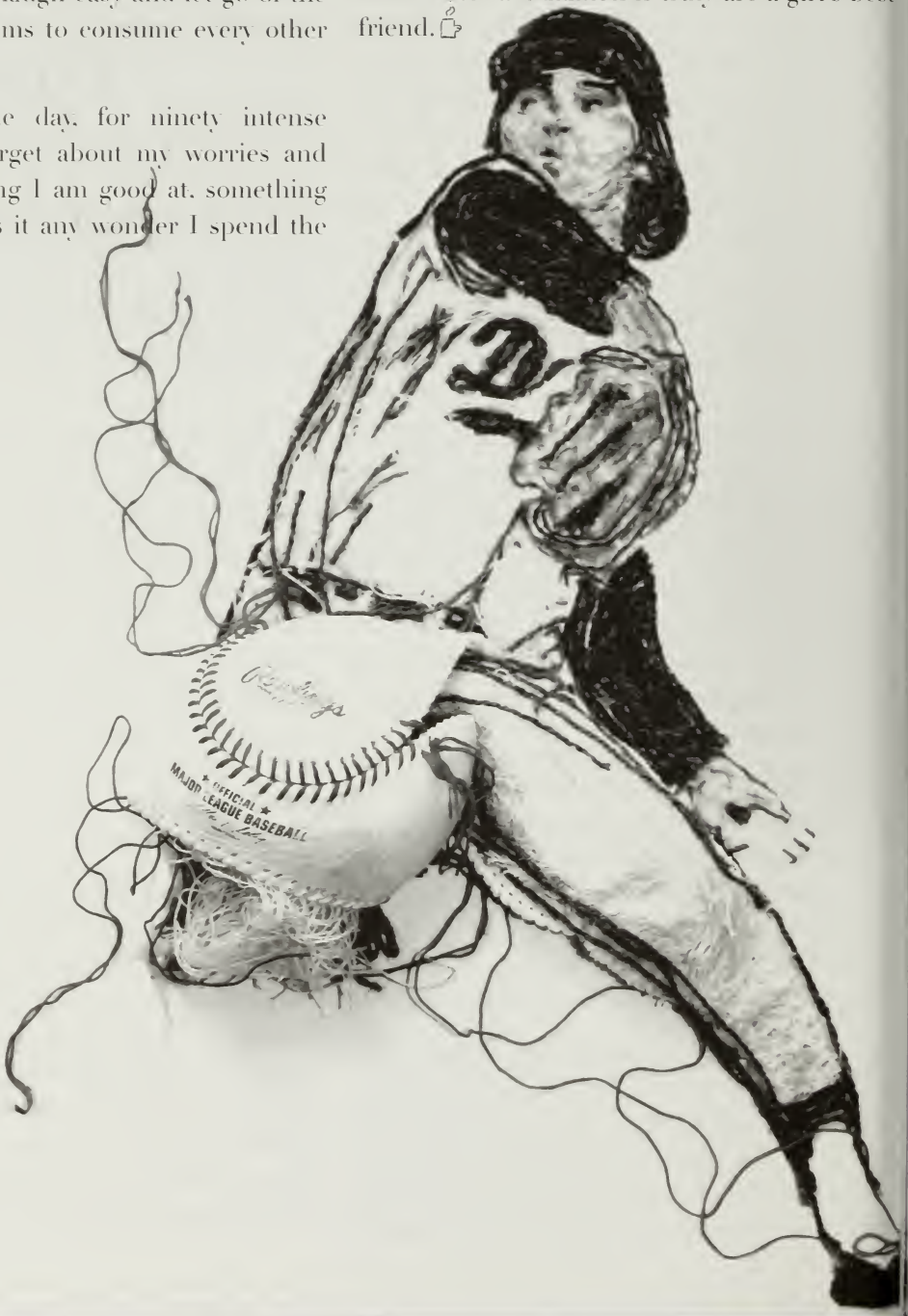
Half an hour before game time, my teammates and I gather around one of our trucks and enjoy a beer to boost morale and get our heads in the game. I have been described as stoical in these moments, but I don't think I'm so deep. In truth, I spend those thirty minutes going over the cruel berating I received the night before.

I smile though, because when I slip on my batting gloves and step in to the box it doesn't matter; nothing does except connecting with the ball – hearing the unmistakable crack of a perfect hit. Time stands still, and for that instant I'm a star. Gone are the anger and resentment, and all that remains is the raw determination which drives me as I round first – careful to avoid the line and the misfortune it would bring – and slide straight into second. I can hear my teammates cheering for me – their passion fueled by Bud Light and Mike's. Even the baseman congratulates my accomplishment. I can't help but give in to my resentment for a moment and the childish thoughts of "no one thinks I'm second rate out here."

The rush of sprinting 'round the bases is exceeded only by the rush of the last-second outs at home. Although it's bad on my knees, I can't quite give up catching. It's too much fun heckling the batters, causing them to strike out or pop the ball straight up in the air, and into my glove. But when one of them is lucky enough to make it back home, it is a thrill to scoop the ball out of the air and tag the runner who slid too early and stopped just short of home.

We spend countless hours honing our skills so that we are unbeatable. For them, it's about fun; for me it's an escape. I am most comfortable in my shorts and cleats, bat in hand. I find my confidence and control my demons, channeling them into hit after perfect hit, right down center field. I can laugh easy and let go of the negativity that seems to consume every other aspect of my life.

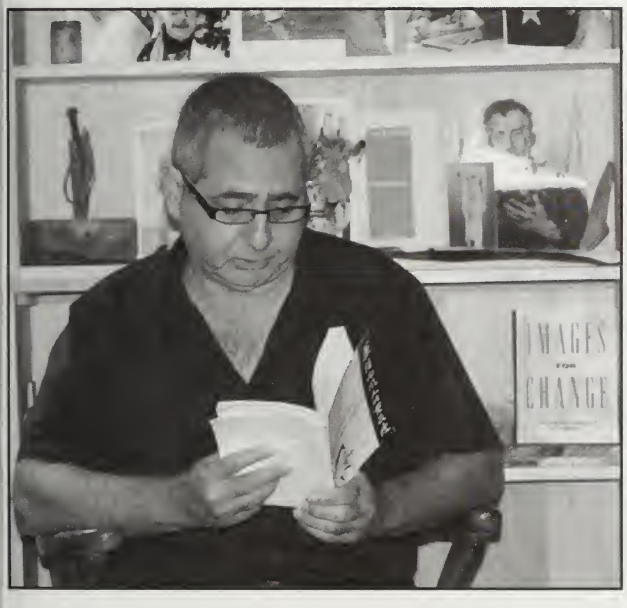
Then, on game day, for ninety intense minutes, I can forget about my worries and focus on something I am good at, something that is all mine. Is it any wonder I spend the majority of my days on the field? On the field, I am strong; on the field I am loved. My authority isn't challenged as it is on the job, and my integrity isn't questioned as it is at home. So, as I lace up my cleats, I stare at the freshly drawn lines, gleaming in the late afternoon sun, and smile. After all, diamonds truly are a girl's best friend.



First Generation

Joe Torra on Life and Writing

Jacob Aguiar



Joe Torra says that writing, for him, is a matter of emotional survival. He is an accomplished novelist and poet concerned with writing true to life experiences. Torra has been writing for over 30 years and served as editor of Lift magazine from 1990-96. He is currently on the editorial board of Pressed Wafer Press and teaching in the creative writing program at UMass Boston. Most of Torra's work is autobiographical, although distinctly fictional, and he encourages young writers to accumulate a variety of life experiences to draw upon.

"Gas Station is my first published novel." He said during our interview, "My father had a Gas station, and I wrote about it. I grew up in a dysfunctional family. I saw a lot of things happen to people growing up and so, for me, my fiction has been about exploring the human. Who are we? What makes us do, or not do the things we do and why?"

What motivates you to write?

"For me it is very much a question of survival, emotional survival. What I'm trying to get at (in my work) is to hopefully do the best I can with any given project under the circumstances and be as honest as I can. I grew up seeing a lot of bad things happen to people. Fiction was always about writing about people, the human experience, who we are what makes us do the things we do. Those kinds of things tend to be important to me."

Why do you find writing as your means of survival?

"Music was my first love. I was drawn to that a very young age. I grew up in a household where there were no books. Nobody read. My parents didn't finish high school. So reading and literature were not really part of the process.

"For me the door to everything was Jack Kerouac. I started reading his work and the whole world opened up to me. I just wanted to write the more I read him, and moreover because he was a working class first generation immigrant. Up until then I thought literature was for other people and it was about other types of people. The more I read him the more I began to realize that writing was something that I could do if I wanted too. I read Kerouac, and he lead me into everything in terms of reading. I began the beats and right on back to Homer. One writer lead to another writer and I knew I wanted to write. However I was still undereducated, under read, so it took me a long time, years, before things started to fall in place. I did a lot of writing and had a lot of false starts. I went to school trying to make up a little bit in my education. I was reading as much as I could and in any direction I could. I wrote hard for ten years before things really started happening, before I started writing material that was what I thought was worthy of what I could do. Both my novel and poem writing came around at the same time."

I was still undereducated, under-read, so it took me a long time, years, before things started to fall in place.

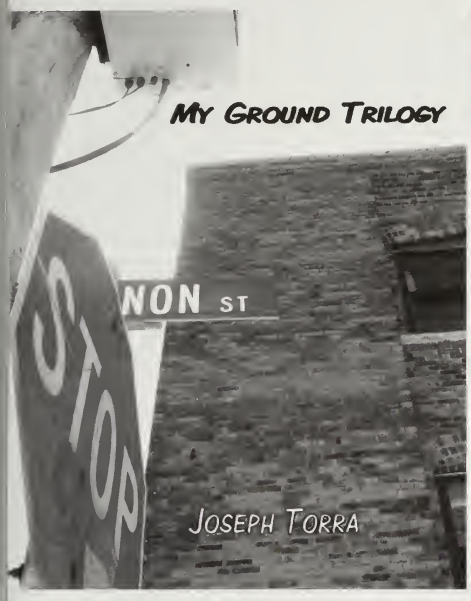
What where you looking for in those ten years that would tell you that this work was good? What were you trying to achieve with your work?

"I wasn't sure. When I was young, like everybody else, I was trying to get published and be famous because I thought that's what it was about. I realized it wasn't, but it took me awhile. When you are young you think any poem or any short story you do is really good. It's like anything in life, you look back at how you were ten years ago an you're embarrassed. I published a magazine and I printed poems of mine in it that were not very good, but that is part of the process. It took me a while to write through the writers I love which was important because you do that to find out what it is you can do as a writer. Nothing is incredibly original no matter what we do, but I think for all writers hopefully the goal is to find out what it is you can do as a writer. Figure out to know it when you see it. You don't even know right away. When I wrote Gas Station I thought gee whose gonna be interested in this. I questioned it all the way. When I first wrote a patch of poems that would become my first real group of poems I put them away and didn't realize till later that I had done something with them that had not done before."

When you are young you think any poem or any short story you do is really good. It's like anything in life, you look back at how you were ten years ago and you're embarrassed.

When you write do you set out to write specifically a novel or a poem? Do the two mediums intermingle?

"They are connected but usually I know I am working with poetry, or that I am working on a novel. But that said a lot, not all, but a lot of my poetry is prose like. I have been told, and I like to think that, poetry finds its way into the way I use language in novels. So they feed each other. Poetry to me is a little more meditative. They have slightly different functions. Fanny Howe once said to me that poetry is personal while fiction is public or social. Maybe there is something to that, but I am glad I write both and I encourage young writers to write both because I think they do feed each other. It is like a painter that might



also sculpt, or a musician who plays multiple instruments."

You are an editor and instructor at UMass Boston now, what did you do for work while you were finding your footing so to speak?

"I edit literary journals which feeds my writing and that is another thing I love to do. I had never considered being a teacher really until Professor Askold asked me if I would teach a creative writing course. At the time I was outta work so I took him up on the offer. But I've spent most of my adulthood and writing life in the restaurant business. That is how I supported myself and my writing."

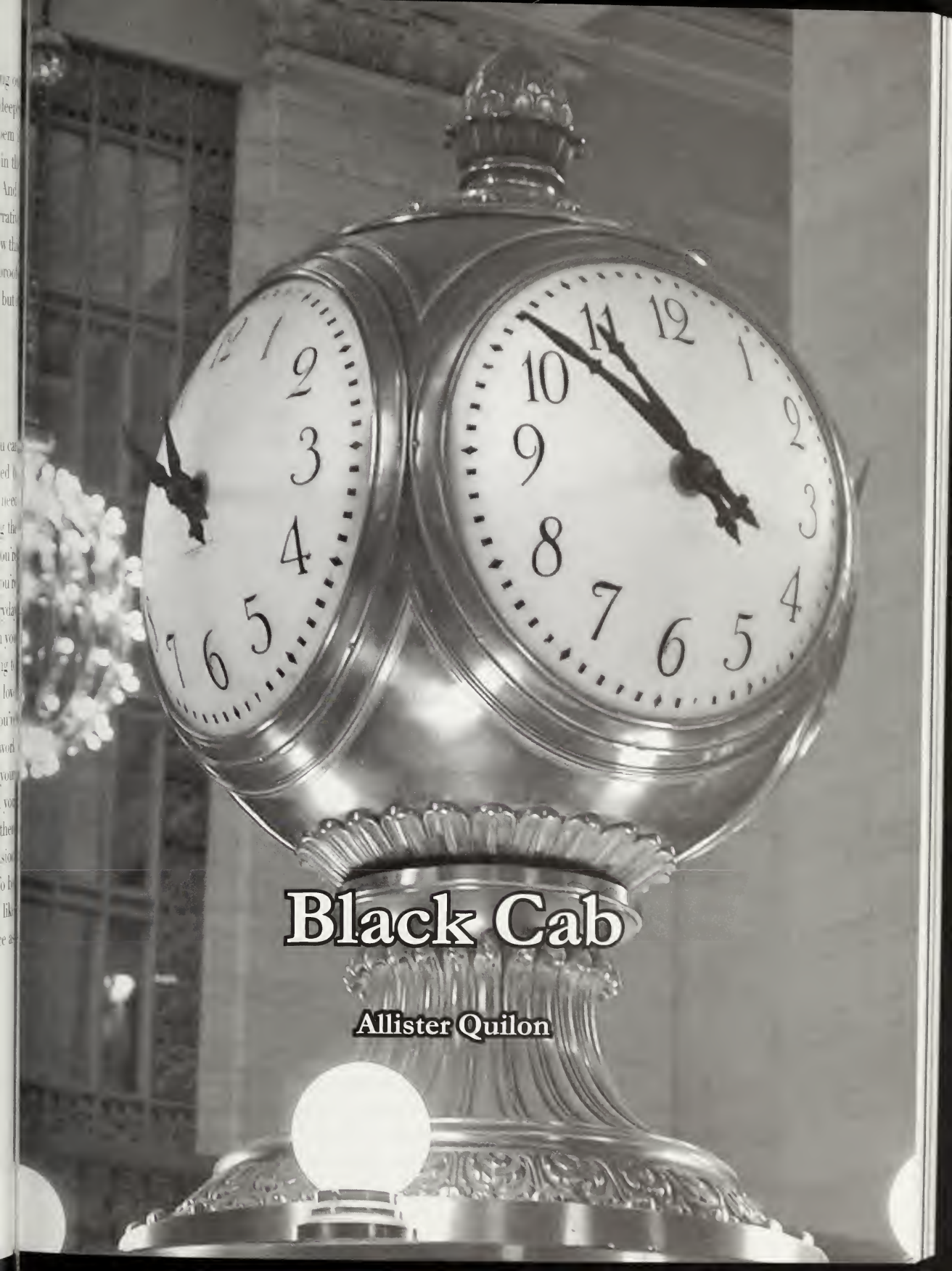
As an editor can you describe how you choose the writing you publish?

"For me, if I can't put it down, if I want to keep reading, I want to publish it. Usually for me it is more form than content. Suddenly as I am reading I will really like how a writer is writing, not necessarily what a writer is writing. Often that is less important to me. How a work is being done is what draws me in. Personally I like things about life. I am less interested in sci fi or horror or genre. I am into real life experience. It is not all there is, but it is what I get drawn to.

Also, I like dark things. If I am reading a story about a happy family living ou in the suburbs, I am not that compelled, but if I am reading about a deeply troubled family I am drawn in. Poetry too, I don't even care what a poem is about. Something about a poem's formal element, whatever is going on in the text, grabs me. That is at least as important as the content, if not more so. And I haven't even mentioned music. I love a writer with a good ear. I like the narrative that has musical qualities, sounds, and tones. To give you an example, I knew this fella that spoke French, and I didn't know French, but he used to read proofs to me in French and it sounded magnificent. I didn't know what it meant, but it sounded incredible. So language can move you even without meaning"

Any advice for fledgling scribblers?

"It is easy to get discouraged. Sometimes you need someone to say, 'You can do this if you try.' Sometimes you need a little validation, and I have tried to offer that to students who I believe could really write. But young writers need to understand that writing is work, and it is hard work. It is not opening the window, and the muse comes in, and you write this amazing thing, and you're rich and famous. No. It is just work. If you're sitting down to write a novel you're looking at a year, or two or three of working. And you have to get up everyday just like your going to a job, when your depressed, when your tired, when you just had a fight with you spouse, whatever. Just the way when you're going to work and you wish you didn't have to go to work. There are days, even if you love writing, when you don't feel like it. But you can't stop, especially when you're working on a novel. You can't let it go. You'll lose it. You need some kind of work ethic you need to find how you work. When you're young you're going on your nerve, but after a couple novels you get an idea of what is involved. When you get to the end of your first draft, that's when the hard work begins because then you have to revise. Younger writes don't understand the importance of revision how much revision is involved in a project and they do not read enough. To be a good writer I think you need to read like your life depends on it. Write like your life depends on it. And live your life fully, get as much life experience as you can."


Black Cab
Allister Quilon

I

No one had seen a storm quite like it.

Sheets of rain plummeted against the ground with the pressure of a jet showerhead, steaming up into veils that rose from the earth like outstretched arms in a sun-soaked bed. This was the scene that Daphne found herself draped in as she ran up the sidewalk of Marlborough St. to catch the cab stopped several hundred feet ahead of her. The driver had barely and suddenly seen her hitchhiker's thumb, a beacon to a wandering ship. She could hardly make out the taxi through the translucent curtains of deluge and Daphne thought to herself for a split-second that perhaps it was a mirage: a half-completed product of her imagination.

Her heels click-clacked out of step with the pitter-patter rhythm of the cloudburst. Her "umbrella" — a pea coat she had neglected to burn after her '09 boyfriend claimed they had grown into "two peas too big for the same pod" — was drenched through. The white cab seemed to shine like an Olympic finish line and Daphne grabbed the wet black handle of the right-hand rear door. Swinging it open, she pulled herself into the familiar and comforting sanctuary that had seen her on the steps to womanhood, witnessed countless confessions

f unrequited love (read: lust), and was now a cradle of manufactured warmth nd safety from the storm.

II

"Where ya goin'?"

"Give me a second," Daphne says forcefully, her lungs still accustomed to the abors of running. "I just need to get a hold of someone and we'll be on our way."

As Daphne's fingers deftly defy numbness to flip through the list of contacts n her phone, the door opposite her swings open. In leaps a woman spun so izzily out of her head by the thrashing wind and rain that she doesn't even eem to notice there is another person occupying the backseat as she plops in.

"Driver, Café Vanille on Charles Street," the woman pronounces breathlessly, rushing drenched loops of hair out of her line of sight. Her voice, encumbered y an unnatural huskiness as if it were an attempt to gain steady footing on a ilting boat, rises in pitch so that the statement sounds more like a question.

The driver cranes his head as far back as possible, straining to deliver an nquisitive look upon Daphne, whose presence is suddenly and silently creaming "Polo!"

The new woman's face flushes with mbarrassment. "Ohmigosh! I am so sorry," he exclaims apologetically. Her voice is uddenly twenty leagues higher in pitch nd resonates with such expression that it betrays her tessitura. "Look, do you mind? f we split a cab, I mean. This is the first one I've been able to catch for blocks."

"If you can just drop me off right in Central Square, that would be daisies."

"It's fine," replies Daphne, trying on a smile that seems to be bench-pressing he weight of her frozen cheeks. She leans in to the front seat to tell the driver. If you can just drop me off right in Central Square, that would be… daisies."

As the car noticeably shifts out of "park" and lurches forward, the woman pposite her pulls her hair into a ponytail, and then offers a hand. "Thanks… eally. 'Julienne'."

"'Daphne'. Nice to meet you."

The rain pelting the shell of the taxi coupled with the squeegee of the wipers craping beads of water off the windshield seems to amplify the lull lingering between the passengers. Julienne speaks first. "So where are you headed?"

"Meeting a date. You?"

"I'm meeting my fiancé in a café."

"Oh, you're getting married! Congratulations."

"Thank you."

"How long have you been together?"

"A little over three years now."

Daphne looks over in Julienne's direction to offer the appropriate smile, and in doing so catches a glimpse of a beautiful jeweled fan necklace hanging around Julienne's neck, noting a cloud of unplaceable recognition entering her mind as she studies it.

Julienne notices her gaze and, smiling, leans toward Daphne as if to share an inside joke. "It's a gift from my fiancé, Peter."

Daphne's heart quickens several paces.

III

The familiarity of the necklace had abruptly dawned upon Daphne. Four years ago, that "'09 boyfriend", Pete, had conspicuously made a new friend around the same time that their relationship began to crack at the seams. She remembered like a recurring dream the day she and Pete had parted ways. They had met at the Hatchshell one evening in a bitter cold November and she returned to him a necklace not unlike the one resting upon Julienne's svelte neck.

She remembered like a recurring dream the day she and Pete had parted ways.

Julienne had no idea who her cabmate was, but Daphne had no doubt in her mind that the woman sitting adjacent to her was in fact the very same woman Pete had been so friendly with during the agonal gaps of their relationship.

Julienne continued the barrage of small talk upon her fellow passenger, but Daphne (all the while responding semi-automatically, and briefly as politely possible) was on a carousel all her own. This was the girl Pete had left her for? What could he have possibly seen in such a bore of a woman?

Daphne found herself a roused volcano, boiling under the surface of her cool exterior as she studied Julienne from her small mouth to her unreasonably large hands. Julienne, on the other hand, indebted for Daphne's grace in sharing a cab with a complete stranger, continued to trawl for any bit of conversation, any possibility for a slight connection she could chance upon.

It was not long before Daphne had frozen the air between them, however, and Julienne, having exhausted herself, was forced to extricate herself from the oppressive tension of the storm-flogged cab ride.

IV

Julienne breaks the silence. "I know we hardly know each other, but can I just lay something out here? Woman-to-woman?"

"The truth is the prospect of getting married scares the hell out of me . . .

Daphne glances up at her not one second before Julienne continues. "I am sick and tired of going out and putting this plastic smile on. The truth is the prospect of getting married scares the hell out of me. It does, it really does. I think about the fights, the bickering, the discussions about how I feel when Pete does this or how he feels when I unwittingly do something to hurt him and I can't help but stop and thinkthis is the person I'm going to trust to be my partner for the rest of my life? What the hell am I getting myself into?"

Daphne restores her gaze upon Julienne, who looks exasperated beyond measure. Suddenly, Daphne wants to punch this girl in the face. She wants to shake Julienne senseless, scream, "Do you know what I would give for those stupid fights? The bickering? Do you know how many men and women I've never talked to again just because I never got the chance to discuss how I actually felt about anything? Do you know what you have?"

But Julienne, with the poundage of Daphne's eyes upon her, feels an abrupt nakedness. In an instant, the shame and pain of absorbing her groom-to-be's pride, swallowing her own, and compressing it all into a neat box feels harshly exposed in a cross pattern of heavy hospital lights. Julienne bursts into tears.

"I'm sorry," Julienne chokes, still chasing her escaping breath. She polishes her face with the heel of her hand. "Look, I really didn't mean to pour all that shit on you, it's just… these past few months have been anything but smooth sailing. I thought we'd get married, y'know, take the next step, and… everything would just work itself out. But it hasn't. And sometimes it feels like it never will. And with this… idea of a wedding hovering over us, it's been extremely hard to keep things together."

The cab is quiet for a moment; Julienne's fears and doubts hang in the air like jet planes tracing letters in the sky. "I met this new man a couple days ago at work," Julienne says, deadpan and defeated.

"I remember when I was in college," Daphne finally vocalizes, "I was dating this guy . . . I remember feeling a lot of the time that there were just so many

things that we didn't—couldn't connect on. I'd lean on him a lot, and there were a lot of times that I felt like I wasn't getting enough love or support or whatever. I remember thinking, 'you know what? I'd be much happier with someone else. I'd be much happier on my own.' The thing is reality turned out to be totally different from the pictures I had in my mind. And it wasn't until we ended things that I saw that I was just blaming someone else for my own dependency. It wasn't until it was over that I thought about what a good thing I threw out the window, and for what? Because I couldn't deal with my own baggage? ...

I've been in a lot of relationships since then, and it's taken a long time for me to see that those problems don't just go away because you let your guard down long enough for someone else to sweep you off your feet."

The cab pulls up across from a café, sparsely populated yet glowing warmly with a sense of quaint intimacy.

Daphne clears her throat. "I guess what I'm trying to say is that before you go ahead and decide what's real for you and what isn't, it might be a good idea to think about what the truth behind that 'reality' is."

Julienne's eyes are a dam, just barely holding back the crest of the rising rainwater behind it. "Thank god it's pouring," she laughs, half-sad at her foolishness and half-sheepishly relieved. She hands Daphne a ten and exits the taxi.

V

The remainder of the ride was a hollow, gaping chamber. When the taxi stopped in front of the subway steps, Daphne perfunctorily paid the driver and stepped out of the car into the storm.

The cab sped off and Daphne winced. She had forgotten her "umbrella." She wept.

The Student Becomes

Allister Quilon

"—— and this new manager keeps messing with everyone's hours so they don't have to pay anyone overtime. I literally worked like nine hours last week. Right? It is! It's like, I probably won't even make rent this month because of their BS!"

Sora listened patiently with the most sympathetic face she could muster for someone she despised. Larayne had formed a habit of airing her life's complaints before class and it seemed—oh, she's crying now; that's new -- and it seemed to Sora that her complaints became progressively louder and more sorrowful as the class filled up.

Sora hated girls like Larayne not just because their parents couldn't spell their names correctly but because they collected hardships like merit badges. This was especially true of girls like Larayne who had absolutely no talent at all, Sora had observed. They thought that slumming and starving and generally living like an artist could make them one. Well if that were true, then clearly it wasn't working very well for Larayne—judging from her work in class.

Sora watched these kids file in every other day and wanted to laugh in their faces, just walk straight up to them and laugh like a madman. *This wannabe dyke with blue hair and a bad dye-job*—HAHAHA! *This fedoraswithafeatherinit-wearing hoofus*—HAHAHA! *This slobby poseur with an asymmetric handlebar mustache*—

HAHAHA! *This girl who thought that wearing three scarves made her a French gypsy*—HAHAHA! She could go on indefinitely, but it was about time to start class.

"You're a strong girl, don't forget that," she patted Larayne on the knee as she stood and made a mental note to grade her even more harshly on account of: one, talking forever, and two, trying to guilt her into grading less harshly. The thought cheered her considerably, and she couldn't wait to see Larayne's next piece.

Sora strode into the center of the classroom and pirouetted slowly as she spoke in order to address the full circle of easels

She strode into the center of the classroom and pirouetted slowly as she spoke in order to address the full circle of easels: "Anybody familiar with the work of Gustave Caillebotte?

. . . *Of course not*, she thought pirouetting in reverse to take in every clueless face.

"Well, he was a contemporary of Monet, Manet, Degas, Renoir -- never as popular but just as important. Maybe even more so as far as the movement itself was concerned." She clapped her hands together. "So! Today we'll take a look at the use of forced perspective in Caillebotte's work."

She turned her back on the circle and made off towards the head of the room, where a projector screen displaying an image of "Paris street, Rainy Day" awaited her.

* * *

Larayne listened to Mrs. Miller's lecture on perspective and Gostoff Kayaboa -- who she was obviously in love with -- with genuine interest. She hated people like Mrs. Miller not just because their hippie parents had given them weird fucking names like "Sora" to make up for their eventual boringness but because they collected knowledge like certificates of achievement. As if knowing a shit ton about art and their favorite artists made them artists too. It was too bad it never worked out that way, she thought, because it probably should but it didn't and if it did then it obviously wasn't working for Mrs. Miller -- at least judging from the exhibition of her work at the campus gallery which she'd practically forced the class to attend for "an example" of some of the techniques they had discussed in class.

Thinking about Mrs. Miller's art depressed Larayne because if knowing everything about art and technique wasn't enough to make you at least a decent artist, then what was? If even shitty art required talent, then how much more

talent would you need to make great art? It was scary to think about and Larayne tried to avoid thinking about it since she still wasn't sure she had any talent and one of her greatest fears was the possibility that she had none. Larayne loved to paint and she didn't know what else she *could* do. She'd even settle for hanging her stuff in some Vegas casino-slash-hotel chain if it came to that . . . *but hanging your stuff in some campus student center?* Depressing.

Mrs. Miller probably hated her life, Larayne thought, and that's probably why she liked listening to other people complain about theirs -- to take her mind off her own. She was basically nice though, and anyway she probably had no idea how pretentious she really was. People like her never did. And at least her interests were interesting, even if she wasn't. This guy Kayaboat for instance -- his stuff was kinda cool. Not as pretty as the other impressionistic guys, but still pretty cool.

* * *

Class let out and Larayne lingered interminably to query Sora on how she might apply "force perspective" in her next piece. Had she listened at all? Sora thought, nodding at what might as well have been Larayne's tried hand at a soliloquy. She then became very sincere and thanked Sora for listening to her "bitch." *Of course she hadn't been listening, these kids had absolutely no interest in lives more important than their own—no, all they cared about were their own personally manufactured dramas and when that wasn't enough to sustain them, they plunged themselves into the dramas of guidos and housewives and glorified karaoke singers.*

Sora would bet good money on three-quarters of the class misplacing the name Caillebotte by the time she next saw them.

Sora would bet good money on three-quarters of the class misplacing the name Caillebotte by the time she next saw them. She placed a hand on Larayne's shoulder and reminded her that she was a strong girl and to never forget it before sending her off politely with the claim that she had to prepare for the next class.

* * *

Sora was nearly done with her fruit salad by the time Valentín entered the classroom, earlier than usual, to put some slides together for his "Contemporary American Sculpture" class.

"Sora, Sora, Sora -- mi amora! How's your weekend?"

She sat up and covered her mouth, chewing on a chunk of grapefruit. "Good, good -- yours?"

"Ohhh, same old thing. I take my kids to the movies -- you know. You went to visit in, ah, Philadelf-yah, no?"

"Mm-hm," she nodded and swallowed, "Yes. Stopped in on the Barnes."

"Ah, quão bom! Quão bom. How's the collection?"

"Well... I spent a lot of time with Matisse this visit, and I really picked up on a few things in respect to relationships between balance and color or, specifically I should say, imbalance and color..."

As she watched Valentín's eyes take in her discourse, the old fear that everything coming out of her mouth was a lie began to creep up on her... her old master's voice, indistinct, though when she really listened, almost indistinguishable from her own, whispering: *you can never be an artist...*

"Can't Go Home Now"

John Burns

Tommy sat on the edge of the bed and with his free hand felt the new comforter. He had helped Gloria put it on with the new sheets and pillowcases, but this was the first time that he had actually felt the beige fabric. Usually she changed the sheets after he left, but she had errands to run and no time to do it later.

"Where are my shoes?"

Her voice came around the door and hit Tommy's ears through the sound of clothes rustling, hangers screeching.

"Which shoes?"

"I wasn't talking to you."

Tommy figured she wasn't, but his response was probably muscle memory. A couple more seconds of clothes flapping around and then they stopped and there was a delay.

"I'm sorry."

Tommy was in mid sip when he heard her. A mouthful of Budweiser kept him from saying something for a moment.

"For what?"

"It was rude to say that. Or it sounded rude. I'm sorry."

Gloria's head and bare shoulder appeared from behind the door.

"It was rude to say that. Or it sounded rude. I'm sorry."

Tommy tipped his can of beer at her.

"Don't worry about it."

She slipped behind the door and back into the closet. She still hadn't found a shirt and she was worried about shoes. Tommy always thought about shoes last. His were by the door, still tied. The shirt, jeans and jacket from last night, as well as socks and underwear, were on him. They made him feel mangy.

A squeal of glee interrupted the sounds of clothes. Then a brief scuffle ensued. Gloria reappeared in a grey sweatshirt with slip-on sneakers in her hand. As she put them on she hopped, stumbled, and stomped until they were on her feet.

"You ready?"

She moved towards the bed and he stood up, finishing the last of his drink. Securing the collar of his jacket with her hands, she pulled him in for a soft kiss.

"I didn't know it was Miller time."

She wiped her mouth after she let go of his jacket.

"It's not. It's 9AM. And this is a Budweiser."

With a smile she turned her head and saw two more cans on her nightstand.

"That's not healthy."

"I'm perfectly healthy. Had a physical a couple months ago. Doc confirmed it."

"Did you tell him you drink in the morning?"

"No. But if I'm healthy without telling him, then I must be really healthy when I don't drink in the morning.'

"That doesn't make sense."

She walked over to the nightstand and picked up the cans, denting them with her initial grip.

"Makes plenty of sense."

"Cranking down three beers in the morning. Definitely a sign of a happy, well-adjusted person."

He followed her as she left the bedroom, through an off-white hallway. They worked their way into the shiny and largely unused kitchen.

"Of course it is. It means I'm confident enough in myself that I can do that."

"That's not what it means."

She spoke as she turned around and started walking backwards towards the garbage. She stuffed the cans into the trash and sighed.

"It means that you need to talk to someone. Normal people don't do that."

He tossed his can past her into the garbage. The banging startled the sleeping cat in the parlor.

"I'm talking to you aren't I? And besides, who's to say what's normal?"

"Normal people."

He cocked his head and looked at her mouth. He couldn't tell if she wanted to smile or cry.

"So could I ask a normal person why you still get dressed in the closet?"

There was no levity taken by her in the comment. She seemed to be genuinely surprised as well.

"What would you want me to do? Be running around naked?"

He shifted to his side and picked up an apple from the kitchen counter.

"Eve did it."

"And it worked well for her."

She crossed her arms and felt a tingle of victory in her response. It wasn't often she felt that. Leaning back against the kitchen wall she raised her chin and grinned.

"Eve fucked up by listening to a snake. Moral of the story is obviously, 'Be naked and don't listen to talking animals.'"

She crossed her arms and felt a tingle of victory in her response.

"Oh really?"

"Oh yeah. That's how Doctor Doolittle messed his life up so badly."

She wanted to see the humor that he saw in the situation. He wanted her to just leave his drinking alone and he would leave her closet dressing alone. Neither were likely to succeed.

"I don't see what the big deal is."

"You were naked in front of me like ninety percent of the last twelve hours."

She uncrossed her and arms and felt any notion of victory slip away from her. It was a hollow feeling that welled up mid-torso and bubbled up to her throat.

"So we both have issues."

"Yeah. Basically. But mine are consistent."

The hollow filled with the makings of anger in her. He went to the sink and rinsed off the apple.

"What do you mean?"

He flicked his wrist and shook off the water and then took a paper towel to finish the job.

"Well, as I see it. I drink whenever I like. I don't have a special time for it. You dress in the closet after we get out of bed, but are naked as a jaybird as soon as we get through the door."

Her brow furrowed and lips moved. But no sound came out. She didn't have a point yet. She took a lesson from him and tried humor.

"What's a jaybird?"

"A nudist."

He had taken a bite of the apple and the juices ran down his chin. She walked over to the paper towels and ripped off one for him.

"Let's just drive you home."

With another bite he nodded and followed her towards the door, dropping the apple into the trash. The cat still hadn't moved from its sleeping spot.

She bought it because she was told it was a safe car. It was grey. She was told it was a safe color.

After locking the door and going down the stairs they settled into her 2008 Honda Civic. She bought it because she was told it was a safe car. It was grey. She was told it was a safe color.

"Your car is practically camouflaged on mornings like this."

The pale, lifeless atmosphere outside was filled was spastic fall wind and cartwheeling leaves of autumn hues. The wind waged war on the leaves. It blew some of them away, tore some in half, remnants stuck to the glass. The battlefield rumbled as the engine came alive.

"I don't think it is."

There was no point in debating her on it. Tommy just buckled his seatbelt and leaned back in his seat. Accelerating as she hit the Revere Beach Parkway, his eyes became wistful as he saw the road sign.

"Let's go to the beach."

She shivered at the sound of beach, remembering the wind outside her car.

"Too cold for the beach."

Tommy wished he had kept the apple. Would've made the drive more pleasurable.

"Take me to the Geary's then."

"They're not open."

She knew she was a terrible liar. The response was too quick and too cautious. She just hoped he was too tired to debate her on it.

"They open at 9AM every Saturday."

"Why do they open so early?"

She wanted to deflect the conversation. She wanted to bring it somewhere long and drawn out so when he was done talking she could stop the car in front of his house and go on with her day with a clear conscience.

"They used to offer breakfast."

"Why'd they stop?"

"Breakfast guy died."

"Oh my god...that's awful."

"Or he moved...or whatever."

Tommy wished he had kept the apple. Would've made the drive more pleasurable.

"You asshole."

"Well I don't remember. I just remember that the guy left."

Her slender fingers reached out for the radio knobs after a stealthy growl. Fiddling with the knobs she found something soft and kept it low. It was purely for a distraction. But as she mouthed the words, she realized that she had to say something.

"I'm not taking you to the bar. I'm taking you home."

"That's ok."

She was relieved until she noticed how fast he spoke.

"I can just walk there anyway. It's chilly outside so I'll probably catch a cold. Then there'll be no Friday night sex. So you're only hurting yourself."

"That's a stupid thing to say."

"Because it's true?"

"Because it's stupid. Stop acting like a child."

"Can't go home now."

She subconsciously pushed on the brake and looked at him. His eyes were straight ahead and there was melancholy in his face.

"Why not?"

He shrugged quickly and turned his hands up and let them drop.

"Just don't want to."

After a couple more turns she ended up on his street. There were cars up and down and on both sides. People in black suits and dresses and pant suits and skirt suits walked towards his house. The brown three-level home seemed alive for the first time in however long. People standing on the porch talking could see their breath floating out of them.

"When are they leaving?"

"About 11."

Nodding she pushed down on the accelerator and passed his house. She didn't know if he noticed. Turning right and right again she pulled over into a spot behind a truck.

"How about you buy me a drink?"

He breathed in deeply and pushed all the air out he could.

"I can do that."

The Restaurant

Jacqueline F. Perry

Danny would always remember the restaurant for the way its air felt. It was a thick and smoky creature, hanging alive between the walls with scents of cinnamon and jalapeños and fried beans riding it in waves. If you stepped into the restaurant for an instant you could already taste food on your tongue. Even years later, even when Danny's worst fear came true and he had grown old, into a toothless old man in a retirement home, Danny had but to close his eyes to taste it. The air had permanently seeped into his bones. Something nestled inside him would forever be eleven years old and surrounded by that foggy restaurant air.

The year he was in sixth grade, Danny spent each sweaty afternoon paused on the edge of the table nearest the takeout counter. Danny would kick the chairs out of the way and swing his legs back and forth until his sneakers slipped from his feet. Left exposed by shorts, his knees seemed too pale against the night-black tablecloth. His skin was a soft brown, the color of churros. Compared to the deep brown complexions and wild black hair of his mother's three younger sisters, they seemed like the knees of a ghost.

The restaurant was owned by Danny's three aunts, his mother's sisters. The sisters were all three the same: plump women with wide eyes and frizzy black hair splayed out violently behind them, as if they were constantly alarmed by something. Danny, bored between the times he left school and his parents left

the office, adopted the habit of visiting his aunts' restaurant each day before dinner. The restaurant sat two blocks from the middle school, an easy ten-minute walk through Danny's neat, oak-lined neighborhood. It occupied the last door of a skinny strip mall, its rickety "Open" sign out of place in a row of chain coffee shops and fast food restaurants.

Perched atop his table, Danny studied his aunts as they went excitedly about their work. The three of them exploded around the room. One burst from the kitchen with an armful of dinner platters; another burst out in breathless exclamations.

Danny was fascinated by the way they pronounced each others' names: like music, he thought, the syllables trilling heavily off their tongues.

"*Ay, Dios mio!*" Clarisa, the eldest and clumsiest, would cry as she sent a plate of *enchiladas* clattering to the floor. Then she would wink at Danny. "You didn't see that."

The sisters were named Clarisa, Catalina, and Carmelita. Danny was fascinated by the way they pronounced each other's names: like music, he thought, the syllables trilling heavily off their tongues. When there were no customers, the aunts disappeared into the kitchen and re-emerged with heaping food trays balanced about their heads and arms. Without warning, they plunked dishes of *picadillo* and *carnitas* in front of Danny and piled themselves into the chairs around him.

"Eat," one would urge him. "Aren't you hungry, my boy? Eat." Danny nodded, still sitting on the table, and accepted a bundle of silverware. The four of them clutched their forks and jabbed impatiently at massive piles of food. The sisters did not stop talking, not even to eat.

"Did you see that Señora Rodriguez's daughter walking arm-in-arm with that blue-haired boy again today?" A pause for a mouthful of food.

"*Sí*, she was in the neighborhood. *¿La viste?* The boy looks like a clown." Then, with sudden shrill laughter, they would erupt into gossip, their lips spewing out Spanish as effortlessly as they accepted forkfuls of pinto beans.

"*¿De veras? Sí? ¡Que raro!*" And more laughter springing off the walls.

Danny made no futile efforts to understand; the words were so deliciously foreign. Instead he would close his eyes and let himself be surrounded. Their voices seemed to somersault through his hearing, he noticed; the syllables struck out with a certain sharp flavor. The words paraded through the air, wrapped in aromas of beef and cheese and peppers, and Danny closed his eyes against it.

relishing the moment of not-understanding. How was it, he wondered, that these words could hold such meaning for his aunts, yet pass by his ears as nothing but meaningless clicking? It should have upset him, yet he found it magical. Why could he not remember, he thought angrily, a time when all language was incomprehensible to him? Had he not been a baby at one point? Why could he not remember? He picked up a take-out menu from the table and unfolded it; the lines of text flowed into his head immediately: *Open seven days a week. We deliver. Quesadillas, $6.99; Enchiladas, $7.99.* Why could he not remember a time when it was all simply confused scribbles on a page?

If he thought too hard, one of the aunts would frown at his furrowed brow and wave a *quesadilla* in his face.

"Are you upset, *mi amor*? Here, eat something. Have two. Do you want another?" Danny obediently swallowed whatever they gave him. When the food was gone, the three sisters rose in sync and cleared the empty plates from the table. One by one, they each planted a kiss on Danny's cheek before shuffling back into the kitchen. Their lips were moist. Then they each wrapped him in a tight hug, their plump arms and bellies nearly suffocating him.

The restaurant filled back up with supper-rush diners as the sun set. Danny would say his goodbyes . . .

"I love you," each one crooned, "*Te quiero.*" "*Te quiero,*" Danny would repeat daringly, savoring the way it rolled off his tongue. He liked the strange syllables, the way they filled his mouth, almost spicy. Yet he detected a strange flatness in his voice; he couldn't roll the R the way his aunts did, like drumbeats. His voice was flat. English was flat, he decided. Void of flavor, English words just sat on the air after he uttered them, stale. They lacked their own particular taste. He longed to not understand.

The restaurant filled back up with supper-rush diners as the sun set. Danny would say his goodbyes, receiving three tight hugs from his aunts before scurrying out the door. His mother and father both returned from work each night at seven, and he always wanted to be home first to meet them when they pulled in the driveway. Danny's house was grey and orderly; it held the same routine within its walls each evening. Danny sat at the table across from his father and finished Geometry homework while he watched his parents. His father, still dressed in a suit and tie, sipped coffee while flipping through the day's newspaper. His mother leaned against the kitchen counter, dicing tomatoes and cucumbers to toss into a salad. She hummed calmly, her movements quick and airy. She always prepared the same meals: salads, vegetable soups, hummus

raps, light foods that never quite filled Danny's stomach.

Sometimes, bored and finished with his homework, Danny wandered into he kitchen and wrapped his arms about his mother's waist. She would pour a ablespoon of salad dressing onto the vegetables and then pause to pat Danny's ead. She was the eldest of her sisters; her face was beginning to set into an xpression of stern wrinkles, and a few grey strands poked out of her knotted un. Yet she did not seem to match the other three. She was a spindly woman, er figure slim and petite as if she were one long bone. She smelled of laundry etergent and department-store perfume, and her knobby elbows prodded anny's back when she pulled him in for a hug.

"Love you," she'd say tersely. She never wasted a word. Her voice was laced ith flatness around the edges, Danny noticed; she'd learned how to pronounce nglish without the accent of her sisters. She was named Cristina and said her wn name dully.

"I'm Chris-tee-nuh," she'd mutter, pinching a new acquaintance's hand in er bony grip.

The day Danny began to formulate his plan was a painfully ordinary Tuesday n April. It was oddly cold for the time of year, a fact people blamed on the New ngland weather. Danny was bundled into his coat and hat when he arrived at he restaurant.

"You look cold," said Catalina, the middle ister, frowning. She waved her sisters into he kitchen. "*Ven*, Clarisa, come help me get ome food into this boy."

They circled the table as usual, plates of *rijoles charros* and stuffed burritos filling the pace between them. Catalina took a chomp rom a burrito and eyed Danny curiously, her hin propped on an elbow.

"You sad, my boy?"

"No."

"You look sad. You're frowning."

"I'm bored."

"Hmm." She pushed a burrito toward him. "Try one. Carmelita made them erself, our own family recipe. You might find burritos all over the world, but ou'll never eat one as good as one made from our own secret recipe. *Vamos*."

She smelled of laundry detergent and department-store perfume, and her knobby elbows prodded Danny's back when she pulled him in for a hug.

"Thanks." Danny said. The burrito was full of peppers; they stung his mouth but he did not reach for water.

Carmelita, chewing, fidgeted in her seat.

"It's cold," she chirped. "Already spring, and still frost on the ground! Imagine! We're going to freeze!"

Clarisa sucked her teeth.

"In Mexico it was never this cold. *Nunca*. Always beautiful and warm, the sun beating down on your skin – remember?" She clutched at her sisters' hands. "*Recuerden?* You remember? The sun?"

"Yes." Catalina recalled, "Remember the summers? When we were children, running barefoot through the neighborhood..."

"Your mother would remember," Clarisa told Danny with a sly smile. "She was the worst one! Parading through town in her bikini, spent half her life at the beach—she loved the sun, that one."

"And the boys, too," Carmelita insisted. "Why do you think she went to the beach so much? Drove our poor mother crazy. Yes, she was a real head-turner, our Cristina—and she knew it too!"

Danny imagined himself running away to some foreign country, perhaps Mexico. He could go to the beach.

With this, the three of them dissolved into wild roaring laughter and scattered memories. Danny tuned them out and tried to imagine his mother young, a starry-eyed girl with her hair down and her eyelashes batting to tempt men under the Mexican sun. No matter how hard he tried, he could not equate this image to his mother. It seemed to be some other girl, some other life. Was that what happened? Did people grow old and become a different person, shedding their old selves like snakeskin? When his mother was young under the sun, did she expect she would one day become a terse skinny woman smelling of laundry soap?

"Ask your mother," Carmelita went on now. "Ask her if she remembers. She will. She'll be embarrassed and pretend she doesn't, but she will!" More frantic laughter.

Danny imagined himself running away to some foreign country, perhaps Mexico. He could go to the beach. He could lie on his back in the water; the sun would beat down on his face and the saltwater would caress his skin, forever warm. He could close his eyes against the world and listen to people talking:

heir language would float past his ears un-understood, blending in with the mbling calls of seagulls overhead. Maybe then he could be able to breathe. Danny eyed his reflection in the glass of ice water before him. His skin was nned and his hair a dark brown. He looked enough like his mother and aunts, e thought, to blend in. Mexican, sort of. The fact that he did not understand he words would be his little secret. He would run through the streets shouting *Hola! Te quiero! Adios!"* relishing the way it purred off his tongue. Other people ould understand him but he would not know what he was saying. He would elong and not belong. Snapping out of his daydream, he licked his lips in udden hunger.

"Look at you, all staring off into space," Catalina teased. "What are you inking about so hard?" She shook her head. "Just like your mother. Always inking, always quiet and silent but thinking. Aren't you?"

Danny shrugged.

"*Tienes hambre*? You want another burrito?"

He shrugged but took one anyway. He guessed he was always hungry.

Their plates nearly empty, the aunts began looking around the room, nspecting their customers with a sort of prying curiosity. There was no one in he restaurant aside from one couple in the corner, nearly finished with their neals. He held her hands in his.

"*Mira*," Carmelita exclaimed, "Look, look over there. See that couple? Young ove, so cute. Isn't it?" She gazed at them wistfully, toying with the diamond ring n her left hand. It had appeared there a month ago, but Carmelita refused to ivulge any details to Danny. She preferred instead to shrug slyly at him, then hisper secrets into her sisters' ears and leave Danny to shake his head while he three dissolved into girlish giggles.

The other two turned to look, not bothering to be nonchalant about it. If here was one thing they loved as much as eating and talking, it was people-atching. The couple did not notice them.

"No, there's something not quite right," Catalina suggested. "Mira. See how he's not looking at him? He's holding her hand but she's looking at the table." he paused and raised her eyebrows at her sisters. "What do you think their tory is?"

"*Yo no sé*," Clarisa sighed, "I don't know. It's love, my dears. Does anyone ver know?" She was met with two spirited headshakes from her sisters. Clarisa epeated, "Love. *El amor.*" She toyed at rolling the word around in her mouth. Amor. You know anything about *el amor*, Danny?" She winked at him.

Danny blushed. "No."

She giggled and nudged him playfully. "Come on, no pretty girls in school huh? In your class?" "No."

"Good," Catalina decided, "It's all a confusing mess, no? You're a smart boy Danny, you remember that for when you get older. Stay out of it."

"Now, now, don't be so jaded," Carmelita argued. "He's a good kid. Aren't you Danny? He'll know how to do it right, treat his girl like a princess, won't you Danny? Yeah. He will. He'll be happy, better than any of us. His mama raised him right."

Danny shrugged.

"How is your mama?"

"She's good."

"And your father?"

"Good. They're both good. Working and stuff."

The young couple got up from their seats, left a few bills on the table, and slipped out the door. The girl's eyes were still on the floor. The sisters watched them curiously for a moment, then turned their attention back to Danny and forgot the subject.

"We ought to send him with some food," Clarisa decided, "For his mama. Yes that's what we'll do. *Ven*. We've got some extra *frijoles charros* in the kitchen. She stood up and motioned to her sisters. "*Ven, ven*. Come help me wrap it up for him."

They sent him on his way twenty minutes later with three warm hugs and a casserole dish full of *frijoles charros*. When Danny arrived home, his parents were already there, seated side by side on the couch. His father had one arm draped limply across his mother's wiry shoulders.

"Put it in the fridge," his mother told him. "We'll have salad for dinner in a minute."

Danny slid the dish of frijoles charros onto a back shelf. He looked at it for a moment, tucked away, hidden by jars of ketchup and low-fat yogurt. Then he shut the door and hurried off to set the table for dinner. He did not ask his mother if she remembered. He did not want to know the answer.

It was in this moment, as he silently lay down the napkins and forks in their proper order, that he formulated his plan. The clock was tick-tick-ticking on the wall: seven-thirty, seven thirty-one, seven thirty-two. He carried the bowl of

salad from the kitchen countertop to the dining room and set it in the center of the table. Everything was in its neat order. His parents were watching television. Dinner waited on the table. The clock was ticking.

He would run away, he decided. He would go to Mexico. There were buses that went there, weren't there? If not, he would walk. Three thousand miles was not that far when you thought about it in terms of the entire world. Either way, he would get there. He would slip into the middle of an unnamed city and close his eyes. People would be bustling by and chattering and living, all around him, living, and he would drown himself in their words, deliciously rolling words, incomprehensible words. Everything would be beautiful and he would not have to understand.

* * *

Danny arrived at the restaurant the next afternoon to find the air the thickest he had ever felt it. It was so full of everything that he could actually see it, Danny realized; swirls of fragrant smoke billowed from the kitchen door and filled the dining room with visible curls of steamy white. He stood still for a moment and breathed in with his nose. There was guacamole in the air, he decided. It was full of food. He could picture, in the back of his mind, his three aunts stooped over the stove: one stirring a pot full of soup, another frying something in a skillet, the third fishing a pot from the oven. What were they cooking? He sniffed again, trying to sense what exactly was drifting in the air. Guacamole, and salsa, and melted cheese, and oily meat, and something oniony, and something cinnamony, and something spicy, and...what else? There was something else. Something... melancholy? Something human, at least. Something his aunts understood but he did not.

There was guacamole on the air, he decided.

Danny planted himself on top of his table and waited. He was alone in the room. Five minutes later, his aunts came spilling out of the kitchen with more platters of food. They spread them out on the table: *churros, chili con carne*, tacos stuffed fat with meat, tortilla chips with *pico de gallo*, enchiladas, empanadas. There was more food than Danny could wrap his eyes around. The aunts squeezed in around the table, suddenly seeming tiny compared to their piles of food.

"It's a feast," Clarisa announced, "A party. *Una fiesta*." She handed out silverware and began to help herself to a meal.

Danny suddenly realized that the youngest, Carmelita, was weeping. Her shoulders were curled in protectively towards herself, her face cupped in her

hands.

Catalina placed a hand on her sister's shoulder. "It's going to be okay, *mi amor*. Here. Eat something. The empanadas are *deliciosos*." She stacked three on a plate and pushed them in front of Carmelita. "Here. Eat, honey."

Carmelita bit into the empanadas forcefully, as if they were her first meal in weeks. Tears seemed to be pouring down her face and clogging up her nose and lips, but she choked them back and focused on swallowing her food instead.

Clarisa patted Carmelita's other shoulder. "You stay strong, now. *Fuerte*. Forget about it, baby. Forget about him." She ladled herself a bowl of *chili con carne*, slurped a sip, then began spooning another bowlful. "Here. You want some chili? I'll get you a bowl. Eat it, it's good."

Carmelita gulped down a swallow, then set her spoon down and looked up curiously. "The whole world is like that, isn't it? Just a bunch of broken hearts trying to put themselves back together?"

"At least all the good hearts," Clarisa said. "It isn't fair." Then she gave her sister a firm pat on the back and sniffed the air, suddenly stern. "But don't talk like that. Here. Have a churro."

Danny contented himself with watching them shyly. His aunts held an air of feminine mysteriousness about them, something in the way they all looked at the table and tenderly brushed their hair behind their ears, as if they were all pondering the same secret, a secret known only to women. This made Danny feel oddly oblivious; he dared not say a word.

"It's sunny out today," Clarisa was saying.

"Yes," Catalina agreed. "And tomorrow it's supposed to be even warmer."

"Maybe if it's warm enough tomorrow, I can walk to the supermarket after work. I'm out of cereal."

She ladled herself a bowl of chili con carne, slurped a sip, then began spooning another bowlful.

Between them, Carmelita was sobbing into her arms.

Danny was startled. "Is she going to be okay?" He asked meekly.

Clarisa whispered to Danny across the table. "She's not getting married anymore."

Danny realized Catalina's left hand was bare. He felt as if something had struck him in the stomach.

"What happened?"

Carmelita looked up. "It just didn't work out."

"That's it?"

"I wish I had something better to tell you, kid. Maybe if it was some ugly story, something ready for the sitcoms or the tabloids, maybe then it'd be easier to understand. But..."

"But?"

"But it was nothing like that. It just...happened. It just didn't work out. One day we both looked up from our daydreams and realized...something was missing. We weren't in love anymore. I guess the world is like that. Sometimes things are just...gone. Gone and you don't know what happened."

Her cheeks flushed; she was suddenly embarrassed. She fiddled around with the dishes of food. "You still hungry, my boy? You want some more food? Here. Have some chips."

Danny ate the chips.

"You want any soup? Here, I'll pour you some soup. Isn't it good?"

Danny nodded, yes, it was delicious.

There was a long silence. The four of them ate, and ate some more, until they had nearly cleaned off the dishes.

A single tear worked its way down Carmelita's cheek as she sipped her last drop of soup. Anxious, Danny reached across the table and took her hand.

"Are you going to be okay, auntie?"

She smiled lightly.

"Yes, I will be." She paused and gave him a good look, up and down. "You have a good soul, Danny. You're a good boy. You're young and starry-eyed and you have a good heart, you can do anything, you know? Just be careful. Be careful that your good heart is protected, is put to good use." She gave his hand a tight squeeze; he squeezed hers back.

You're young and starry-eyed and you have a good heart, you can do anything, you know? Just be careful.

And then, with a frantic smile that seemed more desperate than happy, Carmelita exclaimed, "Everyone hold hands! Around the table! I want to say a prayer."

The aunts dropped their forks and joined hands, as did Danny. Carmelita continued, in a brisk voice, "Here's praying to God that everything's going to

be okay! And it will be, because here we are, together! Together, *juntos*. We don't need anybody else, we've got each other. We've got love, *amor*. The future's bright and everything's going to be fine!"

"Amen," The sisters all declared. There was a strange chatter around the table, small happy remarks made, small smiles exchanged. But it seemed uneasy, Danny thought. There was something apprehensive behind each smile.

But Clarisa beamed joyfully and passed a still half-full tray of enchiladas around the table. "Here, everyone have one, they're *deliciosos*! We can't let them go to waste. You guys still hungry? Eat, eat!"

Danny bit into an enchilada. He watched Carmelita, across the table, do the same. As she was chewing he noticed a glistening of tears form in her eyes, but she blinked and kept them back.

Danny finished the enchilada, swallowing down every last crumb. Suddenly something changed. He felt empty. His stomach was so stuffed with food that it was about to explode, but he was not in the least bit full. His stomach felt empty, so empty. And hungry, so hungry for something that would last longer than just a meal. He looked at his aunts around the table and a sour taste formed in his mouth. His stomach grumbled, feeling impossibly hollow. He understood something. Something that did not taste sweet to his tongue. No, he thought, no. He couldn't quite put his finger on what it was, but he felt it, in the air. He did not want to understand. His stomach grumbled again; some sort of craving was devouring him from the inside.

It was time to put his plan into action, he decided. It was now or never. He had to get away. Swiftly he sprung to his feet and gave each of his aunts a quick kiss. They blinked, startled at his abruptness. He stopped to give Carmelita the longest kiss, wrapping his arms around her plump shoulders, allowing himself, for a brief instant, to feel safe.

But just for an instant. Then he turned and ran out the door. He paused in the doorway for a moment and blew a kiss to the sisters, daring to shout "*¡Te quiero!*" loud enough for the entire room to hear.

Then he shut the door and was gone.

The evening passed easily. Danny sat within the walls of his house and waited for time to go by. He looked at all of the things they used: the plastic strainer his mother washed vegetables in, the blue ballpoint he wrote his History essay with, the ceramic mug his father drank coffee from. When ten o'clock rolled around he brushed his teeth and sat on his bed in the dark, unable to sleep. He listened to his parents' relaxed laughter coming from downstairs. Around midnight they

oo went to bed, leaving Danny, still wide awake, to relish in the silent darkness f nighttime.

The next morning was the morning. He did not go about things as usual. After etting dressed, he removed wads of bills from his piggybank and stuffed them nto his backpack. He said goodbye to his parents and headed to the bus stop as 'he were going to school, but halfway there he took a detour and slipped into ne convenience store at the end of the block. For a dollar he bought a map of lassachusetts showing the locations of Greyhound bus stations. The nearest ne was eight miles away. Danny bought himself a granola bar and a bag of hocolates for breakfast and started walking.

He arrived at the bus station three hours later. He was excited, so on edge hat his head spun dizzy. Still, he focused on the task at hand. He looked round the room. There were people everywhere: people rushing, people toting uitcases, people carrying small children. Danny was flustered. So many people! He spotted several uniformed men behind a desk n the back of the room. Is that where he bought is ticket? He didn't know. A bus pulled into the arking lot, headed in one direction; another bus rrived headed in the other. How would he know hich bus to take? More people rushed by, too many eople, all hurrying somewhere. Danny shivered. He oticed a map of the continent pinned to the wall nd stood helplessly in front of it. He put his finger n Massachusetts, where he was. Tiny, such a tiny state on the map. He allowed is eyes to drift down to Mexico. It suddenly seemed impossibly far away. He tared at it, at its jagged borders, at the little stars that signified cities. So many ities; so many people in each city. How did they all not get lost? Wouldn't he get ost? But then, he remembered, isn't that what he had wanted? He stared at the nap in bewilderment. Mexico dwarfed Massachusetts; it dwarfed him.

He noticed a map of the continent pinned to the wall and stood helplessly in front of it.

Danny was suddenly starving.

He stepped out into the center of the room and looked around. Where would ne buy his ticket? It was nearing lunchtime; the bus station was filling up with eople. Another bus pulled in, packed in passengers, and drove off. Time was assing, too much time. Danny was restless. Where could he buy his ticket? He egan walking over to the desk in the back. Too many people. Too many buses, nd too many places in the world. How would he know which bus he belonged n? Danny's knees shook weakly.

"Danny?" He heard a thin voice call out. Danny spun around. He heard his ame again. "Danny?"

"Hello?" Danny answered. His voice was wavering. "Who is it?"

His brain barely had time to process the sight of his mother running towards him before he felt her arms around his chest, hugging the breath out of him. Behind her were his father and a tired-looking police officer. "Yes," the police officer was saying into a phone, "Yes, we found him."

His mother was crying. She knelt to the floor, cradling Danny in her arms, and sobbed stormily, hard enough for Danny to feel her thin bones quaking against him. Her ribs poked into his empty stomach. Danny noticed tears streaming down his own face, too. Sniffling, he buried his face into his mother's shoulder, clinging to her, soothed by her familiar perfume-detergent smell. "I'm sorry," he said weakly.

His mother only squeezed him tighter. "*Te quiero*," she told him. It was the first time he'd heard his mother speak Spanish.

He understood her words. He understood.

"*Te quiero, Mama*," Danny answered. This made her cry even harder.

They rode home together in the police car. The policeman drove, his father sat silently in the passenger seat, and Danny lay in his mother's arms in the backseat. Danny looked out the window at the familiar neighborhoods zooming by. He unfolded the map he'd bought and stared at it. He stared at the spot where he was, eight miles from home. He thought of the map he'd seen in the bus station, such a big world, so many places.

But he was only eight miles from home.

Danny closed his eyes and thought of his home. He thought of all the things he knew. He knew they would be having salad for dinner; he knew his father would drink coffee before bed. He knew his aunts' restaurant would smell like food tomorrow; he knew Carmelita's left hand would still be bare. He knew his mother's flat accent would never go away. He knew she would always be his mother. He knew this would always be his life. He knew that, somehow, he was going to be fine.

He opened his eyes and let the world back in. He wondered what kinds of food his aunts would make tomorrow. He passed the rest of the car ride like this. He made his way back home, thinking of food. He knew that no matter how much time passed, he would always remember this moment. And he would always remember his aunts' cooking.

Nellie

Annie Doyle

I

At the first ding of the doorbell my mother would say, "Put the kettle on." Some people collect art, but instead of paintings, my mother collected an interesting array of characters who hung around our kitchen table. With open arms she welcomed friends, neighbors, and the occasional stray relative. She served tea and made everyone laugh. Secondhand smoke soiled our lungs while confessions, delicious debates, and sometimes, oddball ideas nourished my imagination. My brothers would sit with their bowls of Cheerios or fluffa-nuttah sandwiches, totally oblivious to the dramas unfolding. I'd listen wide-eyed, pretending to study the back of the cereal box until my mother took notice and sent me on some foolish errand, just when the story was getting interesting.

When Twinkle, the cat who lived upstairs, had tiny orange kittens, I begged for permission to adopt one of them. My mother insisted that cats were sneaky and loaded with fleas. She said fleas were the cause of deadly diseases that could wipe out entire neighborhoods. I didn't believe her. I continued my daily begging until she said that cats were also known to kill tiny babies. When I doubted this, she referred to a newspaper report that told of a family cat that lay on a baby's face and suffocated her. I wasn't overly fond of my baby sister but I wouldn't want to see her smothered. So, I gave up on the kitten campaign and settled for a couple of small, green turtles. To this very day I've never kept a cat. I still look at them as potential baby killers. I bought the turtles, along

with a see-through plastic home, and some turtle food at the Five and Dime. They cost 25 cents each. I called them Ike and Mike. After a few months they managed to escape. My brother said that Twinkle the cat appeared to be chewing on something green and crunchy one day. My brother enjoyed tormenting me so I can't be sure about this.

My mother wore white Bobbi socks and read detective magazines. She wore her jet-black hair in pin curls, always ready for a party. My father referred to the strange assortment of characters who dropped in for endless cups of coffee or tea as "screwballs and lunatics." He said they were attracted to my mother like moths to a flame.

II

Under her breath my mother said, "At least they keep your mother away."

My Father's mother, also known as Nana, or "The Big One" behind her back, wore huge hats decorated with artificial fruit, flowers, and the occasional plastic bird. She always made a quick exit, while rolling her eyes, soon after one of my mother's friends arrived. My mother said Nana had to go home to sharpen her tongue.

Once when Nana caught me whistling she said, "The Blessed Virgin cries when she hears a girl whistle." My mother said she thought the Blessed Virgin might have more important things to cry about.

Mother managed to entertain her guests while organizing children, ironing, and cleaning or peeling potatoes without disrupting the conversation. Everyone knew enough to leave before my father was due home from work, at which time, mother turned into a human Breathalyzer. She would appear at the front door before him, her face tilted up as if for a kiss. It was no secret that her actual intent was to smell his breath. Any hint of alcohol was reason for her to storm into the kitchen and create loud noises with pots and pans. This kitchen clamor alerted us kids to lay low; we knew we were in for a tense evening.

Our next-door neighbor Nellie, with her irreverent sense of humor and penchant for outlandish outfits, was one of my favorite kitchen guests. She would glide in, dressed in her fluffy purple slippers and colorful silk robes. She was partial to dangly gold earrings, hot pink lipstick, and blue eye shadow. After pouring herself a cup of coffee she'd survey the table, share her thoughts, and tell stories that could curl your hair. When she had especially interesting dreams the night before, she would relate them in great detail. The dream book would be dragged out and our guests would puzzle over mystical symbols and hidden meanings.

Nellie's long, tapered nails were painted an unusual color because she mixed different bottles of polish, like a mad chemist, in an effort to come up with a color nobody else could copy. Most times nobody wanted anything to do with the odd shade. In her tireless efforts to be unique and original, she also experimented with memorable and sometimes hilarious hair colors. She was able to carry off any of these looks with grace and pride due to her lofty attitude.

III

With a straight face and a sagging neck, Nellie shared her beauty tips. Glancing around suspiciously to be sure nobody would steal her secrets, she said, "Some women forget to cream their necks. That's why they wind up with extra skin flapping around under their chins."

I'm guessing that Nellie either refused to see her own turkey neck, or her eyesight was far worse than I thought. Maybe it was because when she lifted her head to look into the mirror, her dangling neck skin disappeared. Each time I remember to moisturize my neck, I lift my head and smile at the memory of Nellie. She also had a knack for inventing the most perfect nicknames; Flossie Fewcurls, Minnie the Mouch, and Cardinal Snowflake, to name a few. Nellie had what she called her "shit list." You never wanted to wind up on that list.

Maybe it was because when she lifted her head to look into the mirror, her dangling neck skin disappeared.

Peggy, who lived across the street, was a mean and gossipy witch. She spread, elaborated, and exaggerated any tale she could get her tongue on. Nellie always mispronounced Peggy to sound more like Piggy. I believe this was intentional. One bright, sunny day while most of the neighbors were sitting on their front porches, enjoying the outdoors, Peggy happened to pass by.

Nellie yelled in her loudest Hollywood voice, so that the entire street would hear, "Piggy, where'd you get those glasses?" Before Peggy could respond Nellie said, "I've gotta get me a pair of those. They see every fucking thing that happens and even things that never happened."

Until her "incident" at the Registry of Motor Vehicles, when she was escorted home by two frightened looking policemen, she cruised through the streets of Dorchester in her 1964 Caddy Convertible, surveying her kingdom. My mother vowed to never set foot in that car after Nellie drove up onto the sidewalk and almost hit Father McLaughlin. Eyewitnesses swore it was deliberate, but Nellie insisted that the sun was in her eyes. It would have been easier if she'd

just apologized, but Nellie insisted that Father McLaughlin was deliberately overreacting and trying to cause a scene.

She stood in front of the badly shaken priest and said, "Don't get your ass in an uproar. The car never actually hit you."

IV

The RMV refused to renew her license because she could barely see the eye chart. I was sixteen when she taught me how to drive and enlisted me as her chauffeur. We had some excellent adventures in that Caddy. One day when a very chubby neighbor slowly crossed the street in front of Nellie's car, she said, "I'd suggest we drive around him but I don't think we have enough gas."

Each time I got behind the wheel she'd tell me to assume the other drivers were either drunk, drugged, blind, or just plain crazy. I laughed then, but now I consider it sound advice.

Nellie stopped going to church because she found fault with much of their dogma. She defended her decision by saying, "There is more to this earth than meets the human eye" while wearing a smug and mysterious expression.

Nellie was inclined to believe that humans were sent here from a distant planet. She thought that perhaps we were a social experiment being observed by some interstellar scientist.

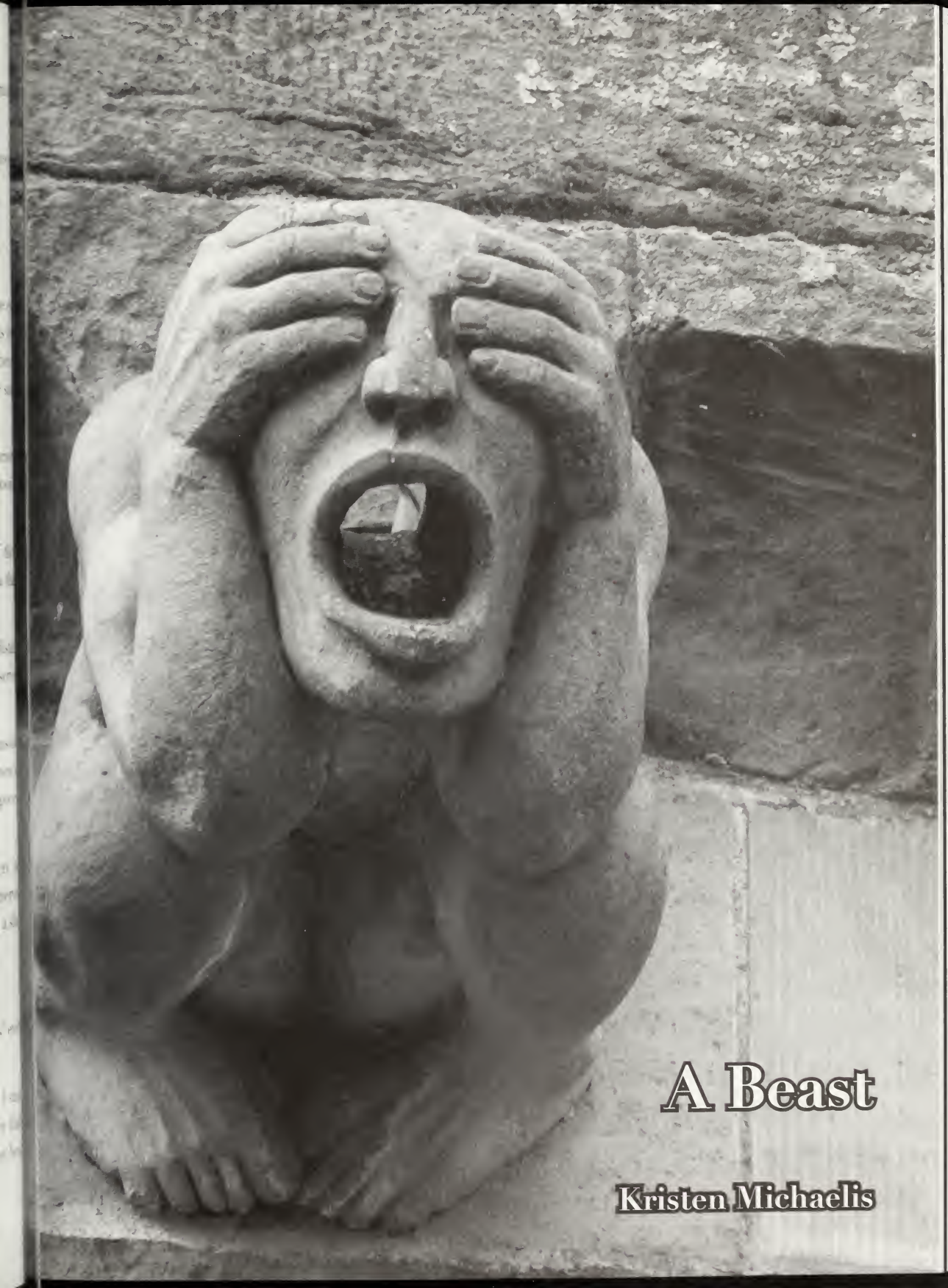
Nellie almost married but bowed out when the groom-to-be made the mistake of saying Nellie should be in charge of the laundry. He closed the deal when he said, "Washing, drying, and folding clothes come natural to the female species. Everyone knows that."

"That's when I called the whole thing off," she said. "Between his condescending attitude and his incessant coupon clipping, he got on my nerves. I went to his house for dinner once and I left there starving. He cut me a slice of cake so thin you could read a newspaper through it."

"What ever happened to him?"

"I heard he moved to Florida where they have 'early bird specials' every night."

Nellie flew off to another galaxy one night in her sleep. Sometimes I smile at the night sky and wonder if she's floating around somewhere in her fluffy slippers. She left me a barrel of stories, a taste for silk robes, and a happy heart whenever I think of her.



A Beast

Kristen Michaelis

She was beautiful.

He had heard about the patient's appearance from his colleagues, but it was beauty one had to see to believe. He stood in awe for a moment until the nurs jarred him from the spell with, "Doctor? Is everything alright?"

"Yes, of course," he replied, mentally shaking himself. He could not help bu think of how differently this young woman's life could have turned out if no for this tragedy.

"She likes to be called Izzy." The nurse interjected into his thoughts again, an the doctor went to sit down across from his patient. She continued to look dow at a little paper cup she had been given for water, giving him time to observ her progress. Although injuries to the body weren't his medical specialization he could tell that her bruises were fading and the raw, open wounds over he fingers were no longer oozing the milky fluid that indicated the presence of a infection. Her physical self was on the road for recovery; now came the difficu part.

The doctor sighed heavily, and the girl looked up at him for the first tim Her dark brown eyes were wide and innocent; it was no wonder she had bee chosen. The expectant hope in her face disappeared upon seeing her visitor, a though she had wanted to see someone else.

The doctor introduced himself, and began to ask her questions about her past and how she was feeling, but there was no response. She just fiddled idly with the paper cup. After about an hour of this fruitless questioning he asked, "Do you miss him?"

The young woman's face brightened. "Is he coming to get me soon? I miss him so much. It's been thirty-three days since I last saw him... He promised he would come find me, rescue me..." The girl's voice faded to a nearly incomprehensible whisper. She returned her attention to the paper cup, now beginning to tear at the top edge. The doctor hesitated to broach the topic he was here for, and doubted she would believe him. But the sooner she heard the truth, the sooner she could learn to accept it.

She just fiddled idly with the paper cup. After about an hour of this fruitless questioning, he asked, "Do you miss him?"

"Izzy?"

She glanced up from her work.

"Do you know why you were taken away from him?"

"I wasn't taken." She sounded offended. "Adam is on a trip, and I'm staying here until he comes home."

"Why didn't he take you with him? If he wants to be with you so much, certainly he could have you go with him?"

A shadow crossed her face, dimming the beauty of her features for a moment. She seemed to ponder what he had implied, and was certainly bright enough to understand his meaning.

"So, if you think that he has lied to me, where are you trying to say he has gone?"

The doctor was tempted to just break the news, to shout "prison!" He could envision the spittle popping from his lips and sparkling down on the table between them like a tiny, falling star. It had always been hard for him to deal calmly with cases like this, when he harbored so much hatred for monsters that could commit such atrocities against another human being. It was unprofessional, but it was in his nature. Instead, he took a deep breath and blatantly changed the subject. He knew that this would raise her curiosity, but he had to work up to telling her that the man she loved was not at all who she thought him to be.

"When did you two meet?" he asked. The girl furrowed her brow at his strange behavior, but suddenly had an effect of euphoria as her mind turned to the past.

"It was three years and fifty-one days ago," she began. Her eyes seemed to look through the doctor, seeing only the moment of which she spoke. Her distance from the present spared her from seeing the cringe that passed over the doctor's face when he realized just how long she had been with that man.

The idea of him using me to pay that debt probably sounds pretty barbaric to you, but I don't want you to think badly of him, he really loved me.

Izzy continued, "I guess I should start from before we met. I always knew that my dad had a lot of trouble earning enough money to pay the bills, and he got into a lot of debt. Hm...The idea of him using me to pay that debt probably sounds pretty barbaric to you, but I don't want you to think badly of him. He really loved me. If anything he loved me more than my two older sisters, since I was the one who always stayed by his side. Felicia was always telling me that I had given up my dreams for him, but I never really had a dream other than to help my father, so it seemed only natural for me to go with this stranger to pay off my father's debt to him. A car came for me around dusk and we traveled all night. I didn't notice where we were going -- I just cried until I drifted into sleep. It was so distressing to leave my father like that, but at the same time I really wanted him to be free of his debts, and he had been promised full forgiveness, with me as the price. I won't say it was an easy choice for him. We spent many long nights discussing it, but in the end I made the choice to go for him. He even tried to talk me out of it a couple times, but I was determined to help him, and that was the best way I could."

She paused for a few moments to gaze into the space just beyond the doctor's head, and then continued. "I didn't always love him. At first I thought he was cold and unfeeling. He demanded that I eat meals with him, and I admit, his commanding nature put me on my guard and even brought out my rebellious side. I even refused to leave my room for the first week and did not eat. After that week of protest I was malnourished and lethargic, unable to even get out of bed. I had so little energy. I don't remember that time very clearly, but I know that when I woke up, he was sitting at my bedside, watching and waiting for me. I learned that he was once a medical doctor and he had given me the fluids and nutrients that I needed in an IV." The doctor's attention was piqued at this detail; he had heard of drug control in situations like this, and he might have some tests done on her blood to see if there were any traces left, though he

doubted anything would come up. She had been away from him long enough that any signs of chemical dependency would likely have disappeared by now.

Izzy's voice brought the doctor back out of his thoughts as she crooned how kind and gentle the man had been, and how differently he had acted compared to her initial judgment of him.

When she paused again, the doctor said gently, "I have a question: did you ever feel threatened when you were with him?"

"Oh, no!" she exclaimed, shocked and incensed on his behalf. "He would never hurt me or anyone else!" The doctor seriously doubted that the bodies that had been found would have the same opinion of this man, but he kept his caustic remarks to himself. After a couple more hours of listening to the girl's rose-tinted picture, painted with words about romantic dinners, dancing, and days upon days of reading together, the patient finally began to yawn and the nurse came to take her back to her room. The doctor just sat there, pondering the interview until the nurse returned and asked, "Well doctor, what do you think?"

His only reply: "I think she's very lucky to be alive." He left the hospital and took his place on the couch as soon as he got home, taking in the other side of this story that the news was portraying yet again. He saw the mutilated bodies, both the freshest that looked nearly alive in the photos, and the oldest that amounted to a pile of unrecognizable bones.

...

He must have fallen asleep in front of the TV because he awoke confused and stiff, the alarm clock beeping dimly from down the short hallway. Sometime later he rushed through the hospital doors. After being let in by the guard, he hurried over to the maximum security ward. He glanced into the interviewing room, breathless, and Izzy was already there, playing with the edge of the paper cup again. The nurse looked up from the chart she was scribbling on and asked, "Long night? You look like death."

"Probably because I was looking at it on the news all night," he shot back in an attempt at lightness, but her comment had jarred him. He paused for a few moments to catch his breath, flatten down the bed head (or is it a couch head?) and rub some color into his cheeks. Taking a deep breath, he opened the door.

Today Izzy was much more present during the interview, and faced his questions about her relationship with the man without any hints of hesitation or fear. The doctor decided to pursue the questions that the officers had delineated when he had been chosen for the job, subjects he hadn't had the heart to broach yesterday. "So, Izzy, did you ever see anyone else in the house

where you stayed?" She looked totally bewildered for a moment, as though she had always thought that she and her perfect prince had always been alone, but she hesitantly recalled, "Yes. I mean, I never saw them, but I may have seen a shadow leave a room that I entered, or heard voices on those nights when I couldn't sleep because I missed my papa so much, but I never wondered why they were there or who they were."

"Did you ever ask him about them?"

"No," she began, but then stopped, as though recalling a hazy memory. "Actually, I did ask him! Only once though, and near the very beginning of my time with him. He said that he hired a couple people to clean the house, but he said they had not been there at the times I described. He was really concerned about my mental health for a while after that so I didn't mention the voices again. If I heard them after that, I would even try to convince myself that I hadn't heard anything, so I wouldn't have any cause to worry him." A small smile played over her lips and the doctor attributed it to the fond memory of the man's care for her. She would probably never get such attentive care again, even from someone who loved her. Her descriptions of the man painted a picture of the kind of person that even the most hard-hearted women would swoon over. And they had.

The doctor asked about her recent memories of the voices, never putting to words his concern that the actions of kidnapped women from three years ago wouldn't do much good in the present. She stayed wrapped up in her thoughts for a while before answering, but he expected the delay in recalling memories that she had clearly worked hard to repress. When she finally spoke it was to say, "I don't remember how many there were, but I definitely remember hearing some voices the night before I left."

"Wait, what? You left?" The doctor hadn't meant to raise his voice. It was very bad form, especially with such a fragile patient. But his surprise and shock could not be contained in that moment. Still a little louder than usual, he continued, "He let you go?"

"Yes." That small smile flitted across her face again. "It was our third anniversary together, and he told me that I could ask him for anything... I should probably tell you that I tried to leave early on during my stay, just during that first week. He actually found me passed out near the wall before nursing me back to health, and from that time I didn't want to leave, but I had been worrying about my father for some weeks before he asked me. I knew that my father was out of debt, but I wanted to make sure that he had been able to find a job or something so he wouldn't have to go back to where he had been. So, when he offered me anything, I thought of my father and asked to see him again."

She paused for a while, and the doctor asked, "What did he say?"

"Nothing. He was stone still and completely silent. It was the most uncomfortable feeling I have ever experienced, like I had betrayed his love and care in the worst possible way, so after a couple seconds that felt like years I began to take back my wish. I was going to say that my father was nothing to me and it was foolish to want to leave, that I would never ask to leave his side again. I would have said all that and more, but I didn't get the chance. Before I could even get a word out he said that I could go. That was that moment; I knew he loved me more than anything or anyone in the whole world. My mother had always told me that you only love someone if you are willing to let them go. I held onto that when she left, and when both of my sisters left; they were moving on to better things, they just didn't need me to be part of it. Now he was letting me go, and go I did. We arranged it that he would have the car back at my father's house to get me in a week, but he didn't expect me to return to him. He said that I needed to be free. I thought he was right, but after two days back with Papa, I realized that I didn't need freedom. I needed safety."

The more he drank that night, the more angry and scared he became.

This time the doctor's inquisitive look was enough to draw out the rest of the story, and she continued. "He was so happy to see me at first. His lost daughter had come home, but after that first day my Papa began to grow suspicious of Adam's motives in letting me go. Perhaps the debt was back in place because my time with him hadn't been long enough. The more he drank that night, the more angry and scared he became. I tried to explain to him that we were in love and that he would never go back on his word to my father or to me. But nothing could ever change his mind when he was like that. Eventually he started to demand that I go back immediately, even though I told him about the car taking me back in one week. He pushed me out of the door and would not open it no matter how long or hard I knocked. My knuckles were bleeding and dawn was on its way by the time I finally gave up. I started walking. The drive had taken about three hours -- I had counted every second with agony and anticipation as I left to see my father -- but I didn't know the way. When I finally found the house...he was dying. I don't know how else to describe it. Adam was always so full of energy and feeling, but when I came through the door, he was just lying there, unmoving."

"Just a moment," the doctor interrupted. "It wasn't quite clear to me how you were able find the place again. It sounded like you were hopelessly lost."

"Oh, I was. It was so strange; I hadn't seen a sign of human life for a day or so,

but then, as I walked along this old highway, a girl ran by. Thinking about it now I see that the circumstances were strange. She wasn't wearing work-out clothing of any kind, just some skinny jeans and a nice sweater, not the sort of outfit that people tend to run in. And the location. The area was very sparsely populated and didn't seem like a place where young, athletic people would choose to live. She was running nearly at a dead sprint, but I jumped in front of her, forcing her to stop, and despite my effort she nearly kept going. I asked if she knew about any big cabins nearby or in the direction of the major river. She looked at me like she knew who I was and gave me precise directions to the cabin where he lived. I remember thinking that he must be very famous in the neighborhood -- if you could call it a neighborhood -- for this girl to know the location so exactly. He never had visitors."

The doctor started to suspect something, and probed a little deeper into Izzy's memory with the question, "What did this girl look like?"

She mused for a minute or two before finally replying. "A lot... like me. She looked like me. The same shade of auburn hair, nearly the same dark brown eyes. Her skin tone was darker than mine, but patchy, like she had gotten too much sun exposure in a few places. We were nearly the same height too. When the hospital had me really drugged up at first, I would remember that moment and wonder if it had really happened. How could I believe my eyes if what they had seen were my own reflection?" The knots between the doctor's eyebrows un-knit, leaving them high on his forehead in shocked disbelief as the pieces fell into place in his mind. "Are you okay?" Izzy asked.

"Yes, of course. You can continue the story where you had left off. Let me think, you said it was like he was dead?"

I had never seen him so lifeless, and there was a rotten smell in the house, like someone had left the refrigerator open . . .

"Yes. I had never seen him so lifeless, and there was a rotten smell in the house, like someone had left the refrigerator open and allowed all the food to rot and mold, but when I went to check, everything was intact. I spent that whole first night just trying to convince him to take some broth I had made. It was the best experience of my life, being able to bring him back from the brink like that, just as he had once done for me. But then, about a week later when he had regained his strength, the police came. The crash of the door woke me first, and I tried to stop them from taking him, to convince them that he had changed. I'm not stupid; I knew something about how he had been before I came, the kind of people he had been associated with, but I know that

he put all that shady business behind him. He has told me countless times that I was all he needed - not money, not power - nothing else. I feel the same for him. As long as we are together, there is nothing in the world I want." She paused for a long time, but then finally asked what had been eating away at her heart since she had come out of the drug-induced stupor the hospital subjected her to. "What has really happened to him?" The silence that followed was filled to burst with the doctor's fear that she wouldn't believe the truth.

He began slowly. "He is in prison, awaiting his trial. In fact, he's been waiting for you to be healthy enough to come."

"But why-" she began, but the doctor held up a hand and stopped her.

"Before we talk about the future, I would like us to talk about the past just a little more." Izzy nodded her consent. "Good. Now, I want to be sure that you feel secure during this conversation, so I need you to know that you can refuse to answer any question I ask. However, I will also tell you that refusing to talk will not help you heal." She looked concerned, but nodded her understanding, and so he began. "How did you get those?" The doctor indicated the long scars on her left arm. She looked as though she was going to cry, but she only let out a small whimper and then steeled herself to answer.

"I did it!" She declared, looking down at her paper cup. He could tell she was lying, but decided to see if she would try to keep up her deception, and played along.

"Why did you choose to hurt yourself like that, Izzy?"

"I- I wasn't good enough to be with him, and I, um, thought that hurting myself would, uh..."

She didn't last long, the doctor mused wryly. He then pulled out a picture to show her. It was a beautiful and delicate engraving of a rose, the lines blood red and seeping slightly. Then he pulled out a second photo. This contained the same flawless rose, but this time in shades of pale, puckered pink. Her eyes began to well up with the tears she had held back before, and the doctor sat there, waiting.

She finally pulled some words together. "It hurt," Another choking sob stopped her. "When he carved it... It hurt so much."

"Why did he do it?" The doctor asked gently.

"He said it was to show how much he loved me, but it didn't feel like love. He was going to create one on his arm, but that was when the police... And I don't really remember anything after they came, except he tried to hide me, but, but my knees, they felt really weak, and it got... really dark. Then I was here."

He was going to ask another question, but she spoke again, "I could tell that all the nurses knew about him. They never talked or asked me about him, and they probably thought they were doing me a kindness, but he's the only thing I've wanted to talk about since I got here. The way they look at me..." She looked up, directly meeting the doctor's eyes at last. "What else has he done?" The doctor just stared back at her, wide-eyed, unsure how to proceed. He had been chosen for this task because he was one of the best, but in all his experience with cases like these he had never known a person so unwilling to accept the possibility that her captor was capable of any evil, no matter how small. She took his silence for confusion and explained, "The looks on the faces of the nurses told me everything. They told me that I was lucky to be alive, and not just because of the wound on my back. Those looks told me that they were concerned for my sanity, like I had fallen in love with a monster without realizing it. More than anything, their eyes told me that I would never be able to love him again once I knew the truth, so please, tell me. What did he do?"

"He killed you. No, but not like you think," the doctor replied to the confusion in her wide eyes. "He fantasized about killing you. He had bodies buried in the recesses of the cabin, and all of them were women who had gone missing over the last six years. All of them had the same hair as yours, similar features and your light build. He knew about you for years before you met him. From what he has admitted to the police, he actually targeted your father to get him into a position where he was indebted to him. But even when he finally had you, love just wasn't enough. He collected even more look-alikes so that he could continue to hurt you, or what looked like you, while still building your relationship together. Those were the voices you heard in the night; they cleaned the house, prepared meals, and then were tortured on his whim."

"How can you possibly know-" she halted midstream. "Oh... that girl I stopped on the road." The doctor nodded gravely as she filled in the missing parts of the story. "That was why she looked so much like me. And the patchy look to her skin, he must have had her wear makeup so her complexion would match mine." She shuddered. "And she was running from him -- from the tor --, from what he put her through."

The doctor watched patiently as she fell into silence, giving her time to process the horror she had just imagined. When she looked up at him, eyes full of unconfirmed fears, he finally spoke. "You are correct. The girl's name is Geneva, and she ran from him before he hurt her badly, but she had to leave behind others, who were all found dead by the time the police got to the cabin. She wanted more than anything to get them out, but she is glad that at least you survived. She told us everything he had done."

"So, murder." Izzy said, trying to appear calm. "He is going to be tried for murder."

"And kidnapping and battery," the doctor replied. "What he did to you definitely adds a few years."

Izzy choked on her next question: "How many . . . lifetimes?"

Izzy choked on her next question: "How many... lifetimes?"

"That won't be determined until the trial."

"When?" Her speech was clipped from trying to keep it from breaking.

"As soon as you feel ready to attend... You're a very important part of this process."

She took a deep breath and sat up straight. It was a striking change; the broken girl gave way to this strong, stunning woman. "Okay," she said in a voice wavering with a façade of calmness. "Then I need to start now. This trial will happen as soon as I can manage."

The doctor's face broke into a smile for the first time in days. "That's great, Izzy! We can start going outs-" he stopped. The strong woman sitting in front of him just a moment before had crumbled into quiet sobs. "What? What's wrong?"

"I-I still love him. Even after he did all those terrible things! I love a murderer." She looked up at the doctor through streams of tears. "If I can love someone like that, I must be a beast."

Epilogue

"All rise!"

As she entered the court the judge saw Dr. Michel nudge the girl to stand. The girl's large eyes were fixed with rapture on the defendant she was there to condemn.

The opening ceremony went off without a hitch, and it wasn't long before the prosecuting attorney began to call witnesses.

"Would Isabelle Bouchet please come to the stand?" The prosecuting attorney inquired. The judge saw the lines of worry on the beautiful girl's face, and watched as she stared intently at the defense attorney as though he were supposed to call her instead. The prosecutor didn't hesitate. As soon as she had sworn the oath he began with, "Did the defendant carve the image of a rose into your back?" A collective gasp from the audience was followed by a minute "yes."

Then her voice rose as she turned to the jury, pleading, "But he was just trying to show me how much he loved me! It didn't hur-"

"Please answer only the question asked by the prosecutor," the judge interrupted. She felt bad about shutting the girl down but she had to keep her court in order despite the presence of a mentally ill witness. The prosecutor asked one more question about the length of her imprisonment with him and she refuted the idea, insisting that she was always a valued guest and eventually his close friend, but never a prisoner. The jury looked doubtful. The next witness called was the doctor.

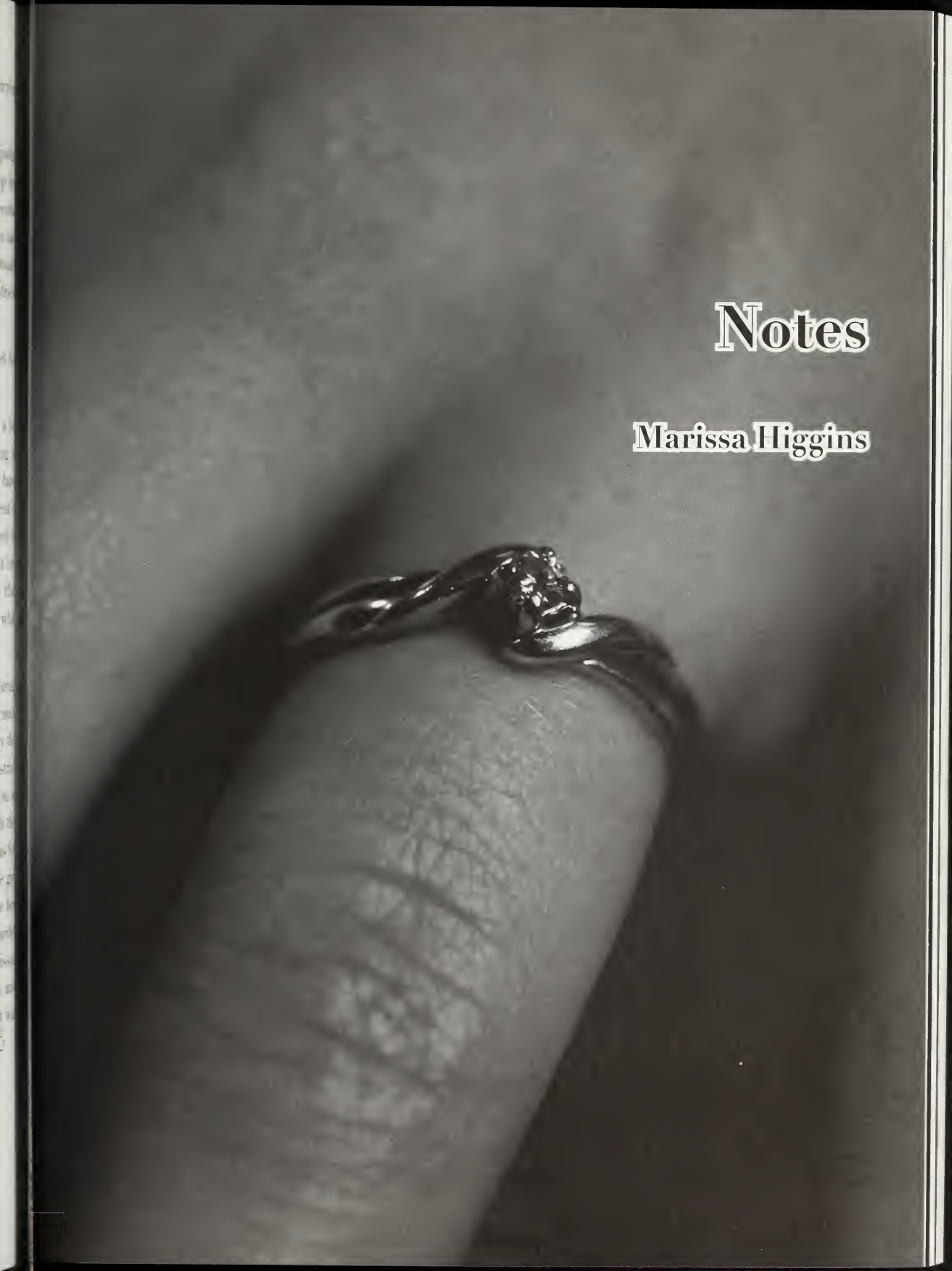
"Dr. Michel, could you please describe your diagnosis of Miss Bouchet for the court?"

"Iz- I mean, Miss Bouchet, is a young woman who has experienced a lot of trauma, and although it is not considered a valid diagnosis according to the DSM-5, she has the most advanced case of traumatic attachment I have ever seen or heard of. For those who don't know, this kind of attachment is commonly called Stockholm Syndrome. She has become entirely attached to her captor, Mr. Roy. His apparent care for her blinded her to the fact that her situation was one of kidnapping, and has brought about a love for him that remains unquenched, despite the torture she has endured at his hand and what she has since learned about his other alleged atrocities."

The prosecution wove an eloquent narrative of the poor girl's captivity, during which the judge had to request order with a rap of her gavel three times because of Miss Bouchet's objection to the accusations against her love. Eventually the judge was able to call for a recess. When they got back it was clear the district attorney had prepared as well as he could to defend his client. But, as soon as he called Mr. Adam Roy to the stand, the man began to describe with relish the murders he had committed. When he started talking about his horrific plans for "Izzy", as he called her, the judge immediately had him restrained and the girl removed from the courtroom. As security led her away, the judge could see her strain against them, reaching with her tear-filled eyes toward a man of murder and abuse. She struggled, and might have broken free if the delicate tissue on her back had not torn. The judge noticed the blood seeping through and ordered a recess so Izzy could be taken back to the hospital. In the end, it was probably better that she wasn't present when he was sentenced to death.

Notes

Marissa Higgins



"I really wish you had called me," I said, pulling my sweater tighter around my arms. "I've been worried about you all day." The cafe was small and cozy, and in the summer months we called it the furnace with the moody nonchalance of people who both love and loathe the comforts of routine. But the barista explained the heat unfortunately wouldn't be on until tomorrow, and I nestled into the corner furthest from the door and resisted the urge to pull Amber into my arms and kiss her soundly on the mouth.

She pushed her hair behind her ear and shrugged. There was a faint glimmer of silver, so slight I almost didn't catch it in her mess of curls, but once I spotted it, it seemed to illuminate the tight skin around her eyes and that she'd smudged her lipstick onto her chin. She looked at once both vulnerable and distinguished. I didn't mention it. Amber had been self-conscious about her age since we started dating last spring, often applying lotions to her face before bed and asking me if I found her beautiful.

"Why do you like me? I mean, you have so many other options," she would whisper, her fingers tracing my spine beneath the blankets.

Most times, I recited all the ways I found her beautiful, and she smiled, and we made love. The last night she asked, I was tired, and I was not as nice.

"You have another option, too, you know," I said pointedly. She shuddered. "I

believe his name is Michael."

Now, I reached my hand across the table, sliding it behind the napkin dispenser. "I'm here, you know," I whispered. "I ... I know I never really know what to say, or what to do, but... I'm here."

Tentatively, her fingers clasped around my own, and I noticed her wedding ring was gone. She'd stopped wearing the engagement ring several months ago, on one of August's hottest days, and I had asked her what her husband thought about it.

Tentatively, her fingers clasped around my own, and I noticed her wedding ring was gone.

"What do you mean, he hasn't noticed? How could he not notice?"

She rolled her eyes. "He just... hasn't noticed. He doesn't notice a lot of things, I guess."

Two weeks later, she told me he'd asked her about the ring while they were having dinner. She said it wasn't a big deal at all – he'd brought it up without looking up from his steak and eggs and she put down her fork and braced herself. He knows, she had thought, feeling her breath tighten in her chest. But he hadn't known, and she told him she took it off because she didn't want to damage the diamond in bleach while she did the dishes, and he nodded and told her to pick up gloves, if she wanted, and she said okay.

"He probably senses something is off," I had told her but she only shrugged and kissed me. I kept the image of the ring – a big, square cut diamond placed dead center in the middle of a yellow gold band – clear in my mind. Once, after she'd had it off for over a month, she pointed to the band still on her finger. "I really prefer rose gold to yellow, don't you?" She'd asked, and I'd shrugged. I liked yellow gold well enough, but in the quintessential way of all other-women, I didn't want to reassure anything about my beloved's spouse.

Later that night, she turned to me and I saw something in her eyes I did not recognize: a sort of excitement mingled with fear, and behind the sharp green, was something I could only register as hope, but was perhaps something else. "How do you think I should tell Michael? I mean... What do you think is the right way to go about it?"

I bit my lip. "I don't know that I'm the best person to ask about this, dear."

She nodded and we were quiet for a while. "I think I'll leave him a note," she said finally and I felt her eyes on me for approval. "He'll be too furious to tell him in person, you know... And a phone call just isn't the right thing." She shrugged and my eyes fell on her collar bone, sharp and thin, and I wondered

how close it was to breaking from the constraints of her fair skin.

"A note is a little.... casual," I said and she laughed sheepishly and I laughed, too, and kissed her. "I wrote you a note once," she pointed out, and I rolled my eyes. She smirked and reached to where she kept it folded on my nightstand.

"I think the content of this letter is a little different, isn't it?" I asked, but she was staring down at the crinkled napkin, the ink slightly smudged between the deep creases, and I admired her dreamy look and I smiled a little, too.

We first met in the supermarket by my apartment. I had sworn off dating after a particularly dull lunch date I shared with a woman I met from a dating website earlier that day, and Amber still teases me about how miserable I looked wandering around the busy market, how she almost didn't approach me because of the sour look on my face. "I usually go to the farmer's market," she had explained, trying to catch my eye with a knowing look on her face. At the time, I nodded, half-listening, and wondered how much longer she was going to stand in front of the sales produce.

"It's so much better, you know, to buy things right from the hands that create it," she continued, "You know there's this farm to table restaurant on Boylston I really like... We could go, if you want," and I realized her hands had stopped counting grapes and were instead gripping the handles of her basket. She caught my eyes and I felt my chest tighten up. It had always been a struggle for me, reading signs from women, and that evening was no exception.

"It's so much better, you know, to buy things right from the hands that create it,"

I nodded and opened my mouth to speak but she held up one palm to silence me.

"Hold on," she said and I watched silently as she scribbled something on the back of a wadded napkin. She held it out and looked at her feet. Her writing was big and loopy and looked especially girlish in the purple ink. Beneath a column calling for "Greek yogurt" and "2 bananas, unripe" were the words I often envision in my mind when I miss Amber and need to feel warm again. Is there a chance I may kiss you after dinner? I reread the question several times before nodding and smiling, wanting to speak but feeling nothing intelligible rise in my throat. I looked at her and took in her big white teeth and her long nose and her bright, excited eyes and as she touched my hand, fleetingly, with the tenderness and playfulness of interest which may be returned, I saw the glint of light from her rings and I felt sadness and fear and just a little bit of hope.

"I'm leaving him," she said suddenly. I nodded and glanced around the cafe

it was quiet, and the barista was brewing fresh coffee, and the short light of winter was already missing from the big windows in the front.

"You're sure? I mean... You've had a pretty intense day... Do you think you should take some time and think about it?"

She shook her head. "No. I mean, yes. I'm sure. I feel like I've been thinking about it for months... The last thing I want to do is think about it anymore. ... I have my letter. I... I nearly left it for him this morning before I.. I went out, you know, but then after I... I went back and got it and rewrote it." She smiled nervously and I reached across the table and pressed my thumb to her chin. I pulled it back and stared at the pink color smudged beneath my nail.

I felt a sharp pain that'd been building in my veins disperse, quietly and comfortably, and there was both relief and fear in my body.

"I'm glad you didn't... I'm glad you went back and rewrote the letter."

She nodded and smiled a little. "I'm glad you're glad," she said, and I felt a sharp pain that'd been building in my veins disperse, quietly and comfortably, and there was both relief and fear in my body.

"Well, you know you can move in with me, right? Unless you think he'd want to move out..." I offered carefully, swirling my mug in my free hand.

She shook her head fervently. "He won't want to move out," she laughed quietly. "That will be a whole struggle, splitting up all of our stuff, putting the condo up for sale, waiting for someone to buy it..." Her voice trailed off and I swallowed hard.

"Did you tell him why? In the letter, I mean, did you -"

"Yes... Yes, I did. I um, I didn't use your name, but I think I made it clear without it.... I mean, I figured if I didn't tell him, someone else would, wouldn't they?"

I nodded. "Do you think he'll be surprised?" I asked, and even I could hear the thinly veined fear in my voice. She laughed again and I decided I hated that sad, bitter laugh and I didn't want her to be that sort of person, and more than anything, I didn't want to make her that sort of person. I pushed these thoughts into the pit of my stomach and looked away.

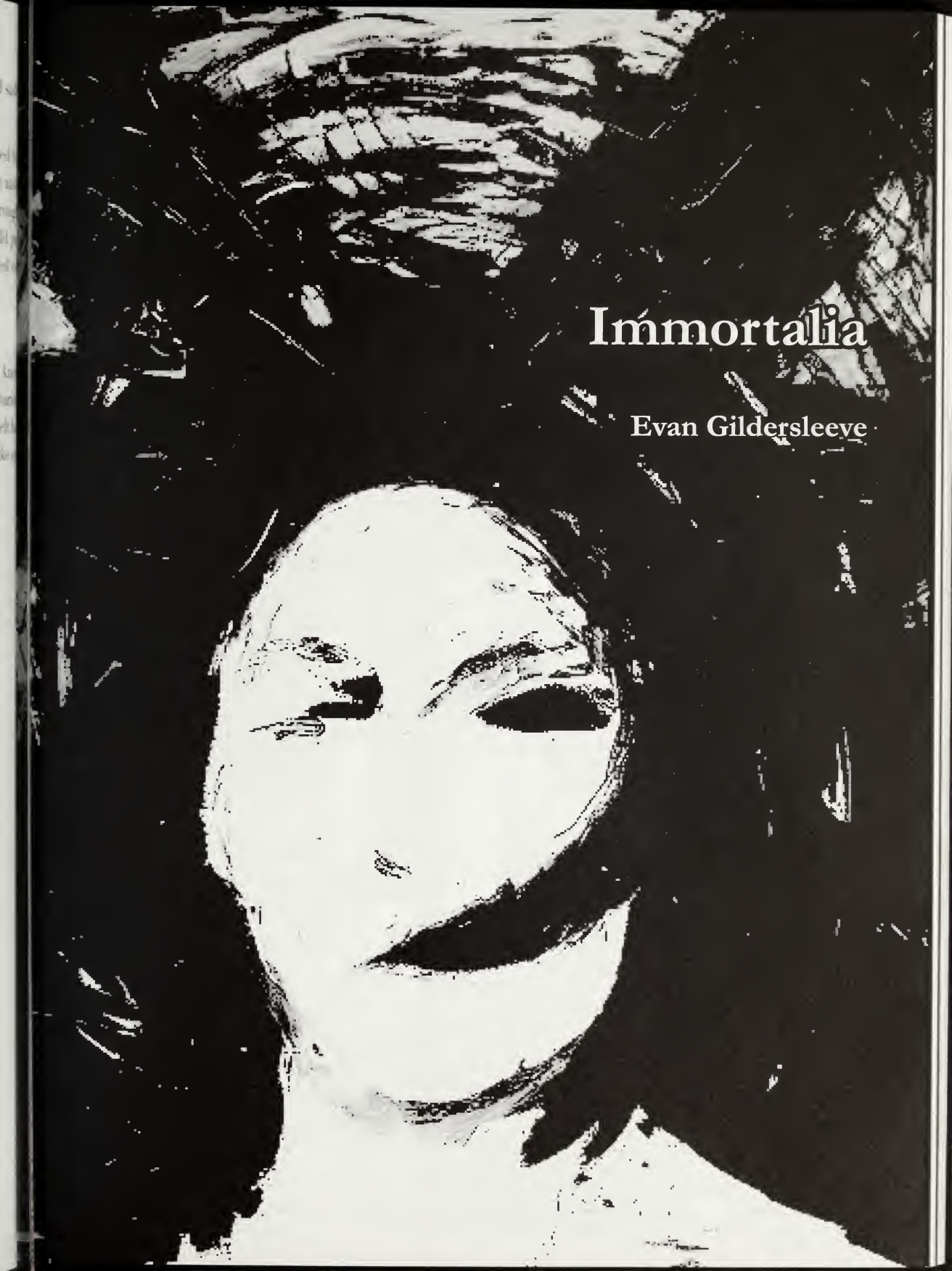
I glanced down into my hot chocolate. The whipped cream melted into the chocolate and the faint white foam stared up at me, a reminder of things that changed while I was thinking about something else.

"You let the whip cream dissolve," she gestured towards it and smiled sadly. "It's usually your favorite part."

We sat in silence for several minutes. She sipped her tea and I watched her crinkle her nose and add two large spoonfuls of sugar. She sipped again and I tried to count the freckles on her nose, but the light was too dim, so I brought her hand to my lips and kissed her fingertips, so swiftly and softly I could just barely make out the hint of sugar on her skin. I swallowed hard and tried not to cry.

"You do know that I love you, right? You know that, don't you?"

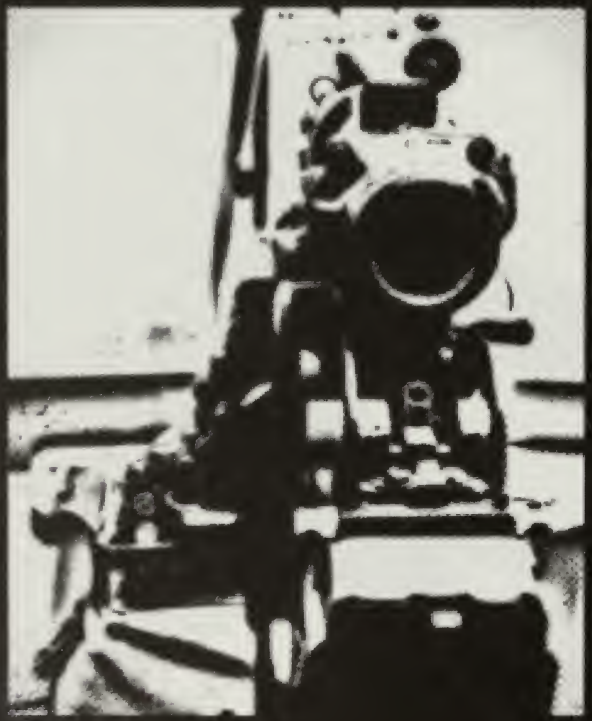
She pressed her forehead against mine and I realized she was crying. "I know, Connie, I know," she whispered, and I smiled and she smiled and the barista walked by but we kept crying and smiling and my palm was sweaty and I felt hot and cold and happy and scared and I focused on her nose and tried to make out her freckles, one by one, in the dim light of the cafe.


Immortalia
Evan Gildersleeve

THE YEAR IS 2011

SITREP:

The 1st Battalion 9th Marines are deployed with 1,257 bodies in support of combat opperations in Afghanistan. The deployment has been hot, and guns have been blazing.



Midnight, June 21st, Team-1-Alpha is in position overlooking route Noble with the objective to eliminate enemy targets in the preocess of planting IEDs.

Team Loadout:
LCPL Fisher: PARA-SAW & PRK 117
CPL. Tanner: MK 11
SGT. Grimm: M4 203
SGT. Patterson: M4 (Team Leader)

Patterson and Fisher hold a ridge overlooking the road from Mt. Rino. Tanner and Grimm patrol the road below.

Allahu Akbar
Allahu Akbar
Time to head out?
Yeah

PORTION OF A GRAPHIC NOVEL

0635 Team-1-Alpha met heavy enemy
ence, demanding a hot extraction. No one
. Guns ran dry and enemy forces continued
advance.

suicide bomber snuck up on Tanner and
m and they all exploded---KIA

tterson and Fisher dug in on top of Mt. Rino,
ryed despirately to make radio contact. A
lit up the wire, but the words spoken were
nprehensible.

"Big Papi, this is Gunslinger Team-1-Alpha requesting immediate evac, over!" Patterson shouted. He sat silently for a moment, considering the duo's grave situation.

. . . ClackClackClackClackClick
"Run!"

CLACK CLACK CLACK

The smell of pennies hit Patterson's nose as he dove fo cover, grabbing Fisher's flak. He turned to make eye conta but only one eye remained to meet his gaze.

Patterson took off like a bat out of hell. The sun had made it way up to a point where he could see the enemy's position. But what he saw brought him no hope.

No backup. No ammo. He crawled cautiously behind the roc The gun fire had stopped. He could hear a group of men maki thier way up the ridge. A narrow opening appeared around a corner, the mouth of a cave. He slid in. It was cold and dank. He listened to the pounding of his heart, the ringing of his ear The footsteps of the men outside grew louder. He maneuvered back into the darkness, careful not to upset any stones. And th ground collapsed beneath him.

A CAVE

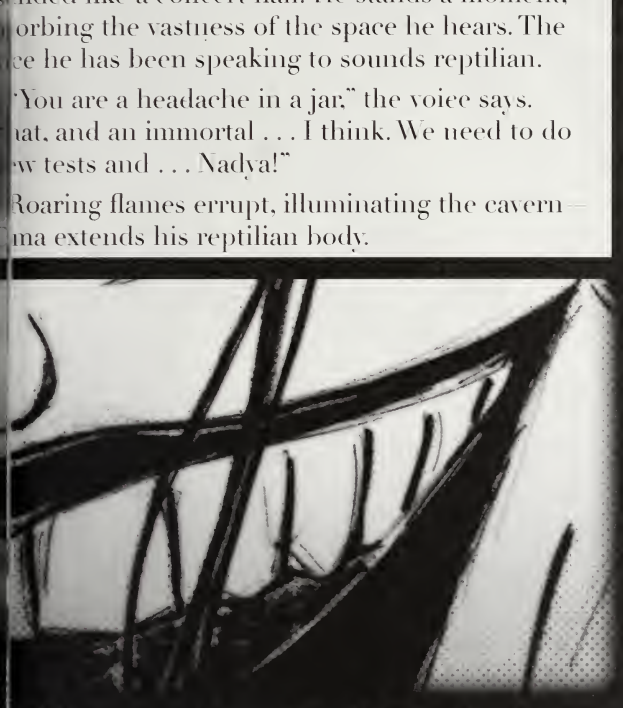
DARIAH
Who's there?
I know something about you that you do not . . .
You know who I am?
Are you taking me prisoner?
I plan to find out what you are. I have been waiting for another trial
You ar
not dea
That i
what yo
are. Ar
you no
suprise
Enduring Freedom, that's a fun one, eh? No. No. No. The war you are actually a prisoner of is the one between me and some of my . . . friends. You see? You are immortal.
DON'T SEE ANYTHING!
I am Doma.

"You know who I am?" Patterson shouts.

His baratone voice resonates through what sounded like a concert hall. He stands a moment, absorbing the vastness of the space he hears. The voice he has been speaking to sounds reptilian.

"You are a headache in a jar," the voice says. "hat, and an immortal . . . I think. We need to do new tests and . . . Nadya!"

Roaring flames errupt, illuminating the cavern — Doma extends his reptilian body.



"I am the prince of Darkness." says Doma. "And this is my beautiful Slavic assistant, Nadya."

"Am I in hell?" Says Sgt. Patterson. "Yea though I walk through the shaddow of death, I will fear no . . ."

"Not in hell," a feminine voice says. "Well, maybe so. Life is hell. A-No? Listen."

Sgt. Patterson spins around, scratching, climbing at the bottom of the cliff, that he fell over.

"Nothing doing boss. We'll have to drain him."

Patterson takes a hard gulp. He sucks in sulfer, and something sharp peirces his shoulder . . .

"Dariah . . . Daria . . ." Sgt. Patterson rasps his wife's name.

"Good Night." Doma snickers.

PORTION OF A GRAPHIC NOVEL

PORTION OF A GRAPHIC NOVEL

PORTION OF A GRAPHIC NOVEL

humming and an electronic pulsating
ing sound can be heard. In the Hallway
orescent light flickers, never fully
inating the space.

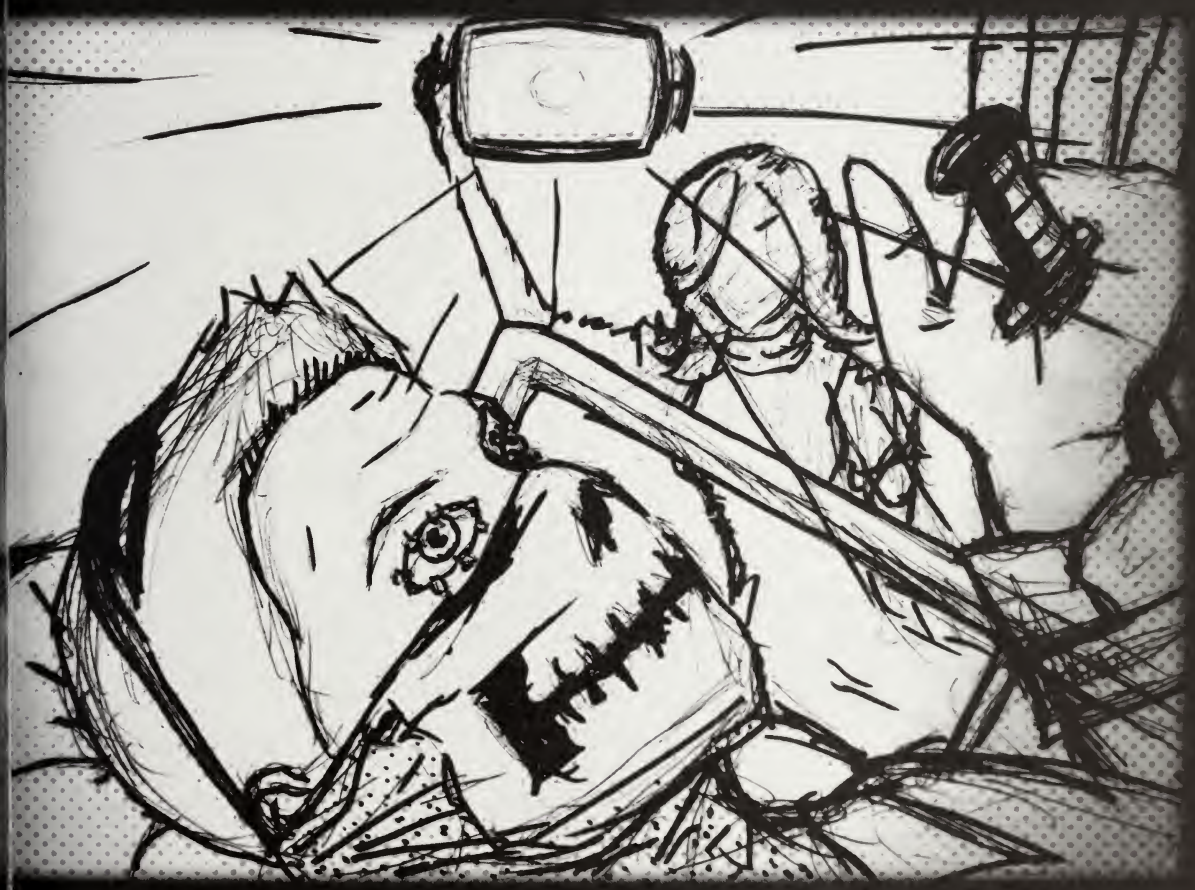
atterson coms to, and looks around to get
earings. He is bound by leathery bonds
hospital gurney, and his hand is sending
ks of pain up his arm. He lifts it to his
. When the light flickers again, he sees a
AR stuck straight through to the grip in
alm. Oddly, it is not bleeding.

e tries to hollar out some expression of
or. Only a hollow rasp escapes.

he next flicker of photons reveals his
ue on a surgical tray next to a blood
ted scalpel.

Hahllo!" says a shallow Slavic voice.

woman with thick black hair and icy
leans over Sgt. Patterson.



PORTION OF A GRAPHIC NOVEL

ave the talking to me Sargent. You are an
rtal," said the woman. She spoke like a
no breathing at all.

. Patterson struggled against the leather
that latched him to the bed. His eyes felt
arbles. They would not shut.

u must believe it. A-No? Due to the faet
Doma drained out your blood, and you're
nguaged in conversation . . . I mean you are
nsive." The woman giggled.

m Nadya," she said. "I have been instrueted
you a kind of—tutorial on how your new
an work for you. First, you should know,
t that you are immortal does not mean
ou ean't get hurt. You ean still hurt—a lot."

Nadya sat, and used the leverage of the seat to craek her neck into place. Sgt. Patterson realized now that it had been at an odd, unnatural angle.

"But you get used to it," she said. "I'm sorry about the hand and tongue thing," she says. "It actually prevents further pain, believe or not."

"Sometimes it takes pain to learn a lesso Nadya said passively. "Oh, and I found your Kevlar with that picture of your wife."

Patterson struggles, reaches, achieves nothing. His mouth is bone dry.

"I have orders to keep you restrained, sir patient. You have infinite time. Besides, you friends and family all think you are dead, a unless you want to relive heartache movie i in your head for eternity, I recommend that you try to remember them as you last saw t and let it be."

Nadya lights another cigarette. The fluorescent lights still flicker but the poker orange light of her cigarette glows on her fa unnaturally.

"You can modify your body as you please even harvest parts, transplants for you. But takes time to mend, lots of time."

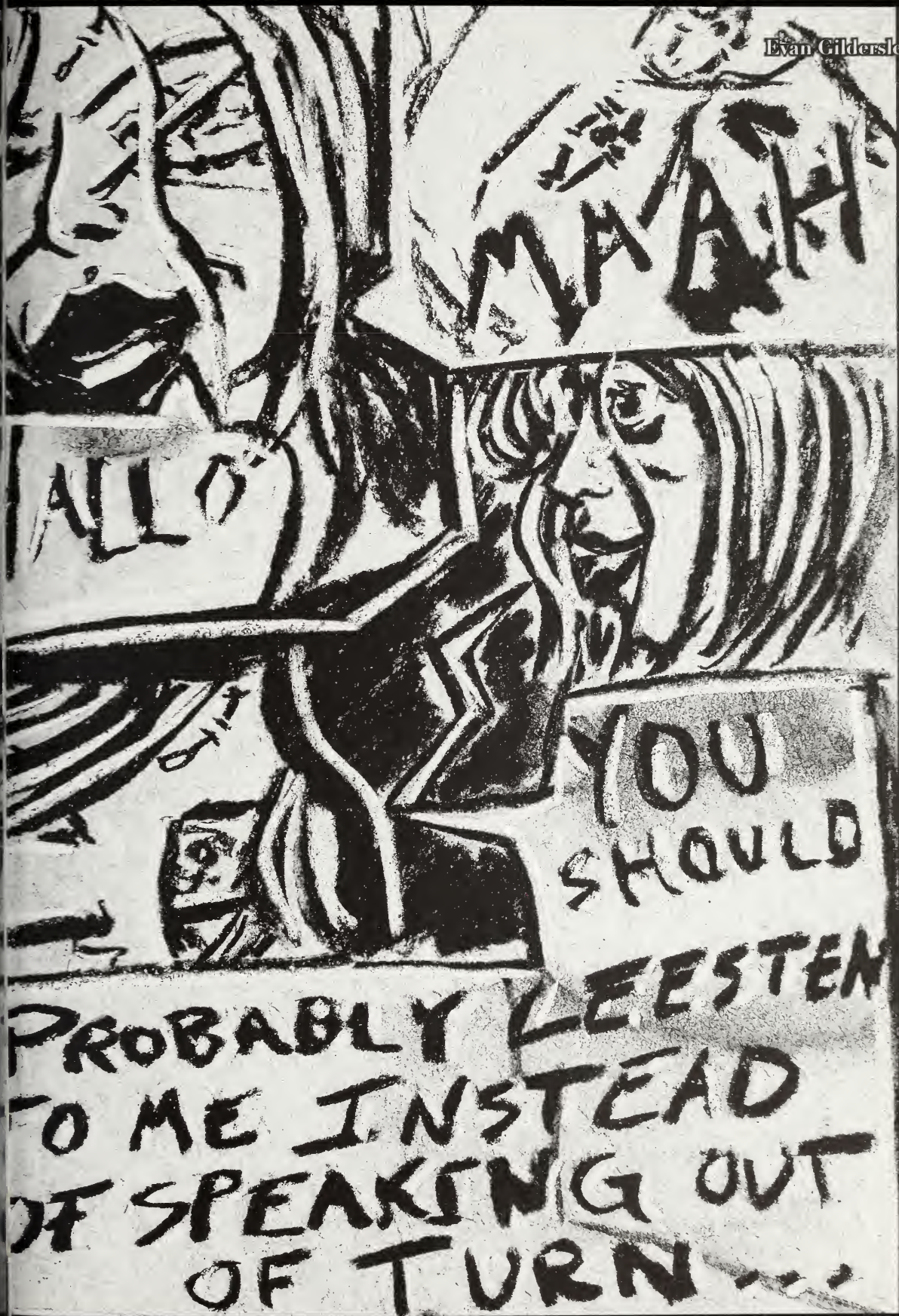
When the light flickers again, Patterson glimpses a torn eyelid hanging over her left . . . A line of thread runs in and out along h frontal bone, and a giant sewing needle pie through the center of her nose. He rests ba in the mattress and lets his mind go.

"Why am I being tormeted?" Patterson tries to speak.

"You killed people." Doma thunders in Patterson's brain.

"Why am I alive?"

"What will convince you? How can I convince you? You are immortal!" Doma says.


MAAH
ALLO
YOU SHOULD
PROBABLY LEESTEN
TO ME INSTEAD
OF SPEAKING OUT
OF TURN...

PORTION OF A GRAPHIC NOVEL

Nadia lights up another cigarette, and ans over the gurney. She blows smoke in s face.

"Like how yer eyes don't sting? You e through the smoke? It's my special cipee You can remove staples in week or . Let them dry out thorough first. Better an, how you say, standard issue. A-No?"

Sgt. Petterson lets his body sink further to the bed. "How can I fight something ke this," he thinks.

"It will be a couple of days before e can get you out of those restraints, I ink. Let your immortality sink in. Hard accept, imortality. Eating, drinking, eathing, all optional now, for show. Of urse, you will have to do it in front of eople, though it's fun to freak them out metimes. I recommend you pick up a obby, stay away from regular folk. You ve a lot of down time in this line of ork. But when you work—oh my god u work!

The computer monitor lights up next to Nadia. She reads it.

"Dobry like the den! It's your lucky day—boss says to take you for a test run . . . must have made quite an impression," she said with a giggle.

PORTION OF A GRAPHIC NOVEL

e minute he feels his hands and legs
eased. Sgt. Patterson pulls the K-BAR
t of his left hand and buries it into
dya's chest.

sapointment fills Nadya's eyes as she
ls to her knees under the force of the
w.

ou idot," she said. "Have you been
ening to anything that I told you?"

e presses a button on her braclet.
nding pulses of electricity through Sgt.
tterson's body. He tries to run and falls
e first into the cement tiles.

ing leverage to her advantage, Nadia
neuvers Sgt. Patterson's rigid, fully
nscious body onto the gurney and she
ls him in front of what looks like a
rigeration unit in a morgue.

tried the easy way, but you would not
lp. Let's see how a month in the Cube
convince you. No food. No water. No
. You get the crash course."

PORTION OF A GRAPHIC NOVEL

KLANK

"Don't worry. The paralysis will wear off in a week or so, and I won't be leaving you in this icebox forever . . . probably. Welcome to Immortalia."

Nadia closes the door, and the compartment depressurizes. Sgt. Patterson's mind struggles to move against his bindings. Maybe he moves a pinky, as his mind writhes. The skin around his face stretches like celophane and his heart stops. He feels like a bug cuaght between the fingers of a sadistic child.

"I must be immortal," he thought. " I would be dead otherwise. This silence is deafening . . ."

TO BE CONTINUED

Jaydon Daniels

Thinking Out Loud

it's not easy for me, to simply believe.
more often there seems to be more than I see,
whether sweet dreams, or shrill evil schemes
lead by demons in hiding, or riding out free.

you're preceded by sin, words squeezed through a grin
to view such reactions, for sick kicks, or sneak in
where all is kept dark, on the edge of your skin,
but left open to view for all those who fell in.

while mysterious yes, you must all but keep asking,
or the vague cliché will tip toe 'round, crafty.
questions mark ends to beginnings set past it,
move forward ahead to those marked questions lastly.

though the worst yet exists to be ahead of the past,
the words still persist as they all echo back.
and in your arms still lies the best never had,
caught in the wind, with the breaths that it lacks.

but in light there is life, moved to wiggle and wink.
each step that is taken is for an air newly breathed.
rhythms still with them, now hearing your beat,
thinking out loud, to flip the heart on your ring.

Michael DiClemente

Tiny Hands

Lost childhood memories
Found in an empty park
A chill up my spine
As the sun ducks behind the winter horizon
Snow covered sand
Where tiny hands once discovered life
Running barefoot with ignorance
Innocence- frozen in the snow
Forever waiting the spring thaw
As the sun continues its descent
I realize the spring does not come
The light and warmth of the summer sun
Is a dream only realized in the past-
A gift taken for granted

Hamdi Mohamed

Beautiful Maiden

She walks in silent beauty
Staring at the luminous moon
Reflected back in her eyes
The night's wind gently caresses her
She walks softly on the sand
Eyes full with excitement
Walking farther, and farther still.
Dipping one dainty foot
Into the calm indigo water
She closes her eyes and exhales
She walks deeper into the water
Smiling brilliantly
Frolicking in the water
A child-like innocence shines
Out of her glowing eyes.
She laughs loudly
Everything seeming at once
Both beautiful and wonderful.
The stars twinkle brightly,
The moon smiles indulgently,
Upon this human creature
The water playfully draws her closer
The wind plays with her silky hair
The trees whisper to her
Nature embraces her
With grace and beauty
A message from the Almighty
"Love thyself, Thou art loved"

Hamdi Mohamed

Lonely Woman

Home is the past
Uncertainty is the future
Love is but pipe dreams
And dreams are wild wishes
Made upon a fallen star
Watch it crash, then
Disappear.

Why must you walk miles
To someone refusing to take a single step
Forward? Why pin hopes on
Human's beings like yourself
Lonely and searching
Don't think they wont leave you
When the sun rises
Even your shadow disappears
In the absence of light.

Wander endlessly then,
Searching for home
In others
Collapsing into yourself
When they leave you
Lost and lonely again

O lonely woman
Your sadness is a thing of beauty
You weep silver tears
For men not worth the pennies
On the dusty floor.
Doesn't it feel like,
Your world has crashed so many times
You wonder how you are still
Standing

Remember when you weren't sad?
When everything and everyone
Was golden
Your laughter so enchanting
That spirits came from afar
Just to listen
Stop telling yourself
That you are lacking, missing
Something
Love is within you
Love begins to
Heal all the ugly scars
On your heart.
Home is
the place where love
Resides, look
Inside yourself.

Jesse Mangan

Never Worn

The snow's a blanket, cold to counteract
the warmth inside these happy homes,
and I leave tracks to be obscured
beneath the flaky wilderness of family.
I didn't want to come home for Christmas this year.
It's the wrong holiday for times like these –
string lights and evergreens,
singing in suburban streets.

Through a picture window, a father
holding his sweatered son on one knee
as high-def claymation flits across a
widescreen TV, the mother sitting in an
armchair idly, proud and happy.

The glint in her eyes reminds me of the way
you used to look at me before that surgery –
shame it seemed so necessary to spare
the child the world we'd seen –
street lights and sirens,
sleepless nights and unemployment lines.

I trudge grudgingly through the yard where my
childhood lies buried, up the back steps and
through an unlocked door where my mother greets me.
She asks how I've been and I say "the same,"
neglecting to mention how in October
you carried her first grandchild as I cradled
your stomach, silent beside you as you slept
or how in November, I tied a pair of baby shoes
together at the lace and tossed them over
a powerline outside your bedroom window:
a memorial more fitting than a grave
for someone who never had a body to box;
who was never even given a name.

Jesse Mangan

Schism

the weekend my father died
I sat in the cemetery
waiting for him to rise,
writhing in the dirt with my demons
for three long nights.
when he didn't come back,
I counted the parts of him that I had left
and came up with the lonesome sum
of the misogynistic liquor on my breath.
when it started to rain and got cold,
I finally decided to wander home
but there was no such place anymore,
so I just stumbled down the coast
to a house on the seashore.
it was my father's house once,
as was the cross on its door.
I took it down and told Christ
he couldn't live there anymore.

Jesse Mangan

still life

those nicotine stains
yellowed the canvas
years ago: half-painted
landscapes in the corner
dried water-color in
the closet; discarded
charcoals ground to dust
beneath dress shoes.

you watch the seasons
through windowpanes
their shapes and shades
and fury silenced ever
since you snuggled into
the stability of forty
some hours a week.
your arms move

mechanically these days:
marlboro to mouth to
ashtray in cold muscle
memory. once they flailed
fervently to recreate
a vision of a world
you're sure could have
been yours if only

you'd hopped a train
one of those days
you went down to the
station with a credit
card and every intention
to escape. you'd watch
the ticker shift through
delays and destinations

struggling to catch a glimpse
of the memories you always
meant to make. you'd promise
"next time" and stay another night,
safe in the embrace of the
habit wrapped around you
like those nicotine stains
around almost everything.

Jesse Mangan

Occupation

Our guitars fed back, ringing the ears
of sweaty Long Island teens escaping
their silent suburban streets until
our fingers blistered and bled. We
rummaged through our pockets,
found a few pills; took those
scrambling ourselves
grinding off our axis
across the vintage pavement
until at last we laid our heads
on the grass of Zucotti Park.
The mad frantic legions shouted
at buildings for answers
dancing wild and furious
bathed in cold fluorescence
while we gazed to the empty sky
in devastating wonder, contented,
contemplating the absence
of the fascism of finance. We buried
our wallets in the grass, deeming
them relics of a suddenly distant
past. We rose and swirled with
the masses: cries of protest and
the marching of feet thudded our
bass beat. We swayed to the rhythm
of the new world order 'til dawn
when we all came down. The sun rose
high and men in Armani shook
their heads as they walked by to
remind us this world would always
belong to them. We dug up our credit
cards and sold our guitars: filling our
stomachs, we emptied our hearts.

Valerie Vargas

To Wake to Keats

To wake on a cold, dismal Autumn day
Glum and forlorn, a coffin filled with grief
The pink of mine cheeks did refuse to stay
Rose blush of love lost to a wretched thief.
Help me end these cursèd dreams of defeat
With every answer spoken- written sweet
Like staring into the beady night sky
Or seeing the ocean for the first time
Ah, John Keats- whose words pull out my very sighs
A mysterious poet with verse sublime.
Wild-eyed solemn lover of the darkness
Noble reminder of true beauty's bane
Broken-hearted father of heavy conscious
With passion and love he cannot contain.

Joshua Ronan

Insert Here:

(Insert addict's name here), my dear,
Your reasons aren't quite clear,
You throw away all your desire
Just to get higher
But we've gathered here today
To just say,
If we may.
We love you, (insert relation here
[son,
daughter,
mother,
father,
cousin,
husband,
wife,
brother,
sister])
And we hold you dear.
But you see, this is your intervention
No
Not Devine
Just sublime
We'd like you to live
More than you know.
We need to see you grow.

Your addiction is a sad depiction of what you were
You remember, long before...
All (insert negative feature here:
[The drugs
The fighting
The hate
The abuse
The yelling
The stealing
The cheating

The lying
The deception
The death})
You remember the before time?
When you had a little head and big dreams.
You'd weave them at night
And display them at day
What a sight...
But then, you got scarred and marred
When... Well you know... The
(Insert negative event here:
[Death
Rape
Murder
Overdose
Divorce
Injury
Arrest
Failure
Cheating
Beating)]
Happened.
But you didn't need to turn to this
And now, you can turn back.
It's not too late.
We're here
With a chance to change.

But then again...
You aren't here as I'm writing this...
Where'd you go?
ring *ring**ring*
Ma' can you answer that

Who was it Ma'
Crash...
Ma'...
Ma'....
(Insert pronoun here: he/she)
Is what?
No.

Insert Here:

He/she went out...
With who? Dead?
With a needle in what?
Inserted what? Where?
But...
That's impossible
Not him/her... Not me.

Insert here:____

James P. Gordon

PRELUDE TO A DREAM

WE DON'T LIKE THE DREAM OF OUR LIFE,
YOU WILL BE CREATING A NEW DREAM,
THE OUTSIDE DREAM, IT IS A DREAM OF VIOLENCE,
A DREAM OF INJUSTICE,
WE CAN'T REFUSE OUR DREAMS,
FROM THAT PLACE OF IMPRISONMENT,
THEY MAKE THEIR IRRATIONAL ATTEMPT,
THEIR RIGHTFUL ROLE;
WE CAN'T REFUSE OUR DREAMS,
THEY ARE LOST ASPECTS OF YOURSELF,
BUT THIS PROVES TO BE TRUE,
WE CANT REFUSE OUR DREAMS,
TO TAKE AN OBJECTIVE VIEW.

Anna Piotrowski

A Flame

A flame, a spark, a fire,
A performance for the eyes.
A flame can be a signal of life,
Or an indication of demise.
A dance with flowing movements,
Arms swaying side to side.
It radiates warmth, so comforting,
No matter what the size.
It can represent the passion of a burning heart,
And it may symbolize ambition.
From blue to orange the colors change,
It can represent transition.
It can cause pain through its beauty,
Fill and light the sky,
No matter how you see it,
It will surely delight the mind.

Cool and calm,
A breeze glides on,
The stillness of the sky.
Above the ground,
Amidst the clouds,
This sphere of light resides.
Often as a crescent,
Brightly shining, so majestic.
It can lie above the ocean,
While it hovers over deserts.
As the sky is filled with darkness,
The moon is certain to emerge.
Glowing with its radiance,
Shining with a pale white gleam,
You lie beneath it peacefully,
As it watches while you dream.

Midnight blue coolness,
then goldenrod warmth; it takes
twenty four hours.

Though moments won't last,
memories will stay; they are
frozen frames in time.

Hallima Ibrahim

A Self-Portrait

The dry air of African land, shattered as sound waves
battle freely to beat into the skins of those who surround the young mother.
Screaming and yelling, as the beauty of life can be seen through the shadows of misery.

A child, born to a one who was yet still a child.
The beauty of this moment begins as a long journey.
See the infant evolves into a child. As the child grows, as the child grows, violence becomes the nurturing hands as it leaves her empty and hungry. Scream, throw, bite, hit.
The ears bleed.
One broken jaw, one bruised face, a million shattered hearts.
The eyes become hollow.
Look how they dance around the child.
Look how they mocked and extended their shadowy damp hands.
They strip her once-innocence
They strip her again- Love
They strip her again- fulfillment
Dancing, dancing the dark shadows dance, cloaking. She yells, no one hears.
She panics, no one feels.
Hot tears drip from the hellfire of agony.
Silence.

Time begins to change, slowly turning as the blossoms bloom into wilting flowers.
Horizons expand and life becomes filled with a daily routine, the girl becomes years older.
School years are filled with searching, searching for what?
To be found? To be found…
Few friends pass by, as the days of searching become shorter rather than longer.
Then the shadows surround the young girl, not the shadows of adults but ones of her height.
Shouting vile words, as they conduct a warfare from which she can not scheme
an escape.
Escape. Escape. Escape. Find your place.
She leaves the faith, slowly but surely. The one she calls God, seems to abandon her.
"Find me!" She yells inside. Puts on the makeup,which does not fit her skin.
Society sets a standard, running running but she cannot reach it.
So she slices it, cutting away the pain. So she inhales it, blunt by blunt, pain floating away, smokey. So she drinks it, sipping away the pain.
But shattered pieces are not fixed with cheap glue.

Skin seeps in as the beam of sweat fills her.
Intoxicated she dances and dances in the night. She's looking for a solution, drifting with winds that can take her so very far. But no one can hear the shadows of an unsung soul.

A beam of light shines through a tunnel. Something is calling her to come out.
Follow the beams, follow the beams. A whisper is said in her ear,
"Find peace, find love"
She comes upon a horizon.

Standing tall a woman of years, A woman of days, A woman of hours, minutes & seconds.
The horizon she
looks at, is something unusual. Unfamiliar, yet safe.
The horizon is filled with smiling faces, loving people. Wealth and happiness.
Faith and care.
As she leans towards it, she stands. Below her feet are her fears.
Hard and black. Backwards and edged.

The heart begins to beat as she looks from her feet to her future.
"Stop, quiet now" says one, "Run for it, it's all a lie" says another.
Eyes closed. She listens, for once to herself.
One step-Strength
Another step-Wisdom
Another step- faith.
She breaths in slowly, inhaling the city and exhaling the deserts of her ancestors.
Open your eyes. Look ahead. Take a look. Do you see that what you stand on is all that you conquered?
Do you see what you look at is all you want? but there's a path to be walked upon.
In between your future and her past, she will find people who will cross roads with her.
Some walk all the way, some only half way.
Even despair will stop her in her tracks but,
She will walk as the ancestors whisper.
"Baada ya dhiki faraja."
After hardship comes relief.

Inna Varshavskaya

Worst Enemy

The day that I found out was tragic
I wish there was something
that would bring you back,
something like magic

You never showed any symptoms
Until that headache took over your day
It felt like bombs exploding in your head
You couldn't even sleep in your own bed and
Your brain became your worst enemy

The tumor spread faster than a high school rumor

Blurry vision,
difficulty walking,
difficulty speaking ,
loss of memory
became your way of life

The doctors tried to save you
They went in with a knife
Tried to cut out the devil
They tried to bring you
back to your normal level

You were finally getting better, but
then you received that letter
The cancer was back
and bigger than ever

This time it wasn't planning on leaving

I got the call that my friend's life was over
It was the worst news I ever had to discover

I watched you in pain for a year
You never showed the feeling of fear
As doctors would say
"More people live off cancer than die from it"
But you died, before I got the chance to even say goodbye
I'm not going to lie, I still have moments where I can't help but cry

Is it really that difficult to find a cure?
Technology is intensifying
and
We still have tumors developing?

Cancer it kills, its worst than a gun shot
We need a cure, I hope they haven't forgot

Spencer Dang

Awakening

Wandering aimlessly in the cold dark
Without cause to shout or sing
Was I with a concrete heart
But every winter has its Spring

Love, I came to abhor
Assisted by acid view, heart's shadows grew
But the ice encompassing my core
Melted when I met you

Glass covered roses lay littered before me
Vibrant colors belied their hostile intention
Fearful of the thorns, I resisted the sea
Only to be enthralled by a glimpse of perfection

Amidst the colorful chaos, you stood pure
In serenity lost, an image of the light
Breaking the monotony with your sweet allure
Before the new path, walls fall as passions ignite

I ventured down your path, heart beating fast
As mundane day gave way to exotic night
Alone you blossomed in the field vast
Glorious as inner radiance burned bright

Uncertain and shaken, I can only watch shyly
But you reveal little, true self kept hidden
Mystery shrouds you like green tendrils of ivy
You have invaded my mind causing pulse to quicken

You fade as the other flowers rise
The Sun tries to obscure my North Star
But their trickery will never fool my eyes
I'd face anything to be where you are

Through a road of thorns, I'll gladly tread
I'll resist all advances, and wait for night
To catch a glimpse of white against dusk red
Being near you is my secret delight

Despite newfound courage, I'm afraid
From cold Winter to warm Spring I go
But if Moonflower, my cherished jade
Says no, I return to the snow

Keegan Blute

Antarctica

I'm bound for old Antarctica,
For benighted winters or sunlit midnights,
For crystal fields where blank winds roam,
For an anti-Hyperborea of unknown heights,
For the last wilderness for dreams to call home.
I'm bound for dark Antarctica,
Where wizards might yet reign,
Where the map corners are unfilled,
Where in blankness all possibilities maintain,
Where some pagan spirits might yet be un-killed,
I'm bound for bright Antarctica,
Since that's where the dragons are,
'til this scared grove's uprooted and they're slain forevermore,
Banished to the deepest trenches and out among the stars,
And once more we are cast adrift to hunt for Eden's shore,
Yes I am bound for sweet Antarctica,
A dark faerieland in the cold,
I'm bound for lost Antarctica,
That I might find my soul

Through My Viewfinder

Davin Surin

Robert Draper—a *National Geographic* photographer—said, "By wresting a precious particle of the world from time and space and holding it absolutely still, a great photograph can explode the totality of our world, such that we never see it quite the same again."

Street photography, recently made popular from Brandon Stanton's work *Humans of New York*, is the documentation of the human condition. Through Street Photography, the artist is able to capture the very essences of life and distill a moment from all the chaos. From the glint in a stranger's eye to the witty composition by the photographer, street photography focuses on making miracles out of the mundane.

The following photos are a collection by Davin Surin. The photos represent today's generation of confused adults, meandering through this cluttered day and age. They also represent the pull of love, of drama, and of the disruptions in our world. Each frozen frame tells a story, but that story is never as static as the photo itself.

Dreams

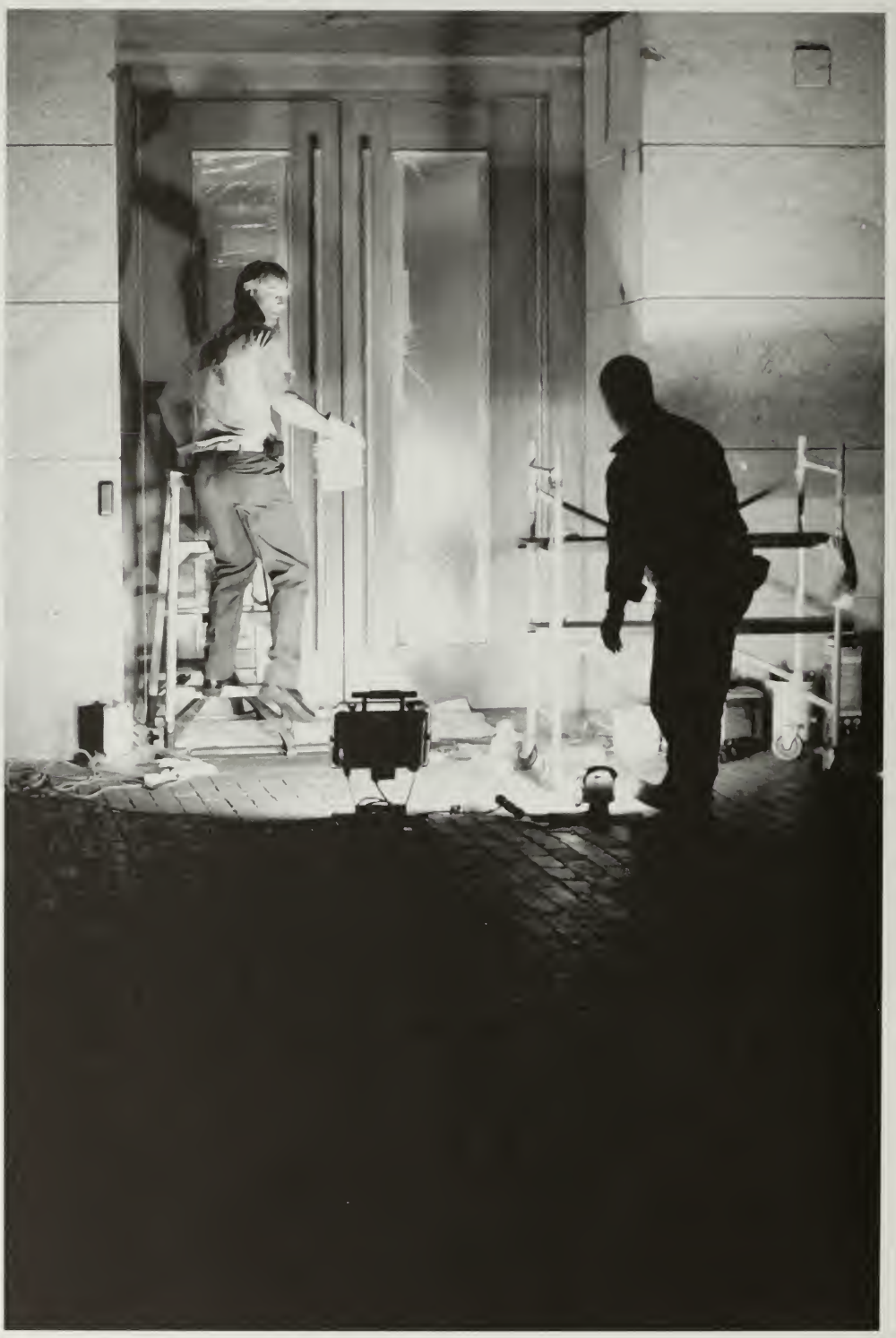
History Lesson

Hard Headed

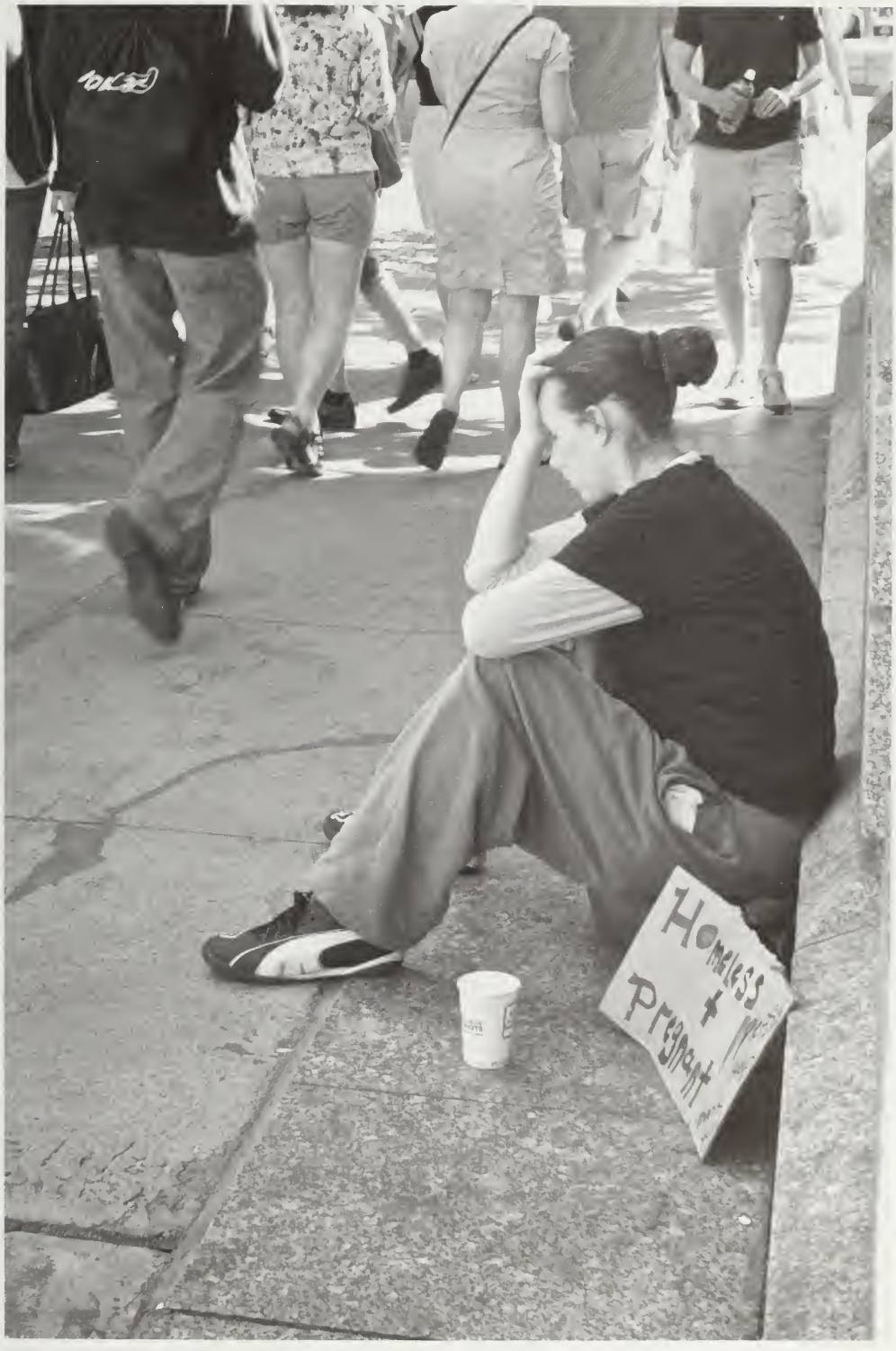
All Eyes on Me

Market

One Man A Cappella



Shadows at Work



Stratification

The Artist

The Decisive Moment

Checkmate!

Gainful Employment

Objectified

Spring Creative Writing Contest Winners and Finalists

Best Poem

Midori Gleason
Sonnet for Rory, 216

Runners Up for Best Poem

Jesse Mangan
Who Reaches Heaven in Which Order?, page 217

Ty Muto
Hikus from November, page 218

Best Stories

Jerimiah Bergstrom
The Hammer of Omari, page 219

Mary Ann Bragg
Touch in a Stange Land, page 227

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Rruga per ne Shtepi (Coming Home), page 231

Best Essay

Nicole Bousquet
Wheeling, West Virginia, page 239

Midori Gleason

Sonnet for Rory

Rory refuses to paint any walls white.
"What is this, a fuckin' hospital?"
He let me and my friends stay with him despite
our mess, disrespect and lack of wherewithal.
By red walls with golden trim he scolded
me for not knowing he wasn't kidding
about how I kick off my boots. Nor did
he find it cute how Florence just slid in
as if she owned the place. "Does her majesty
want a bell?" he snarled up, cracked a beer,
spat, "fuckin' English." As a courtesy,
he walked out, slamming the door but was cheered
to tears when we bought him roses to apologize.
I'd show him this but he'd tease me for being nice.

CONTEST FINALIST

Jesse Mangan

Who Reaches Heaven in Which Order?

Buildings wavered and fell. Ash
dusted streets and we wondered
how many other kinds of rain
we hadn't thought of. Some-

body started a war but we
stayed home to argue over
the physics of collapse. We
filmed documentaries and

clawed at throats in newsrooms;
lost sight of the body count but
tracked every penny as we
measured the cost—

Ty Muto

Haikus from November

Gutted and hollow
You rotten caved in bastard
Scaring kids like that

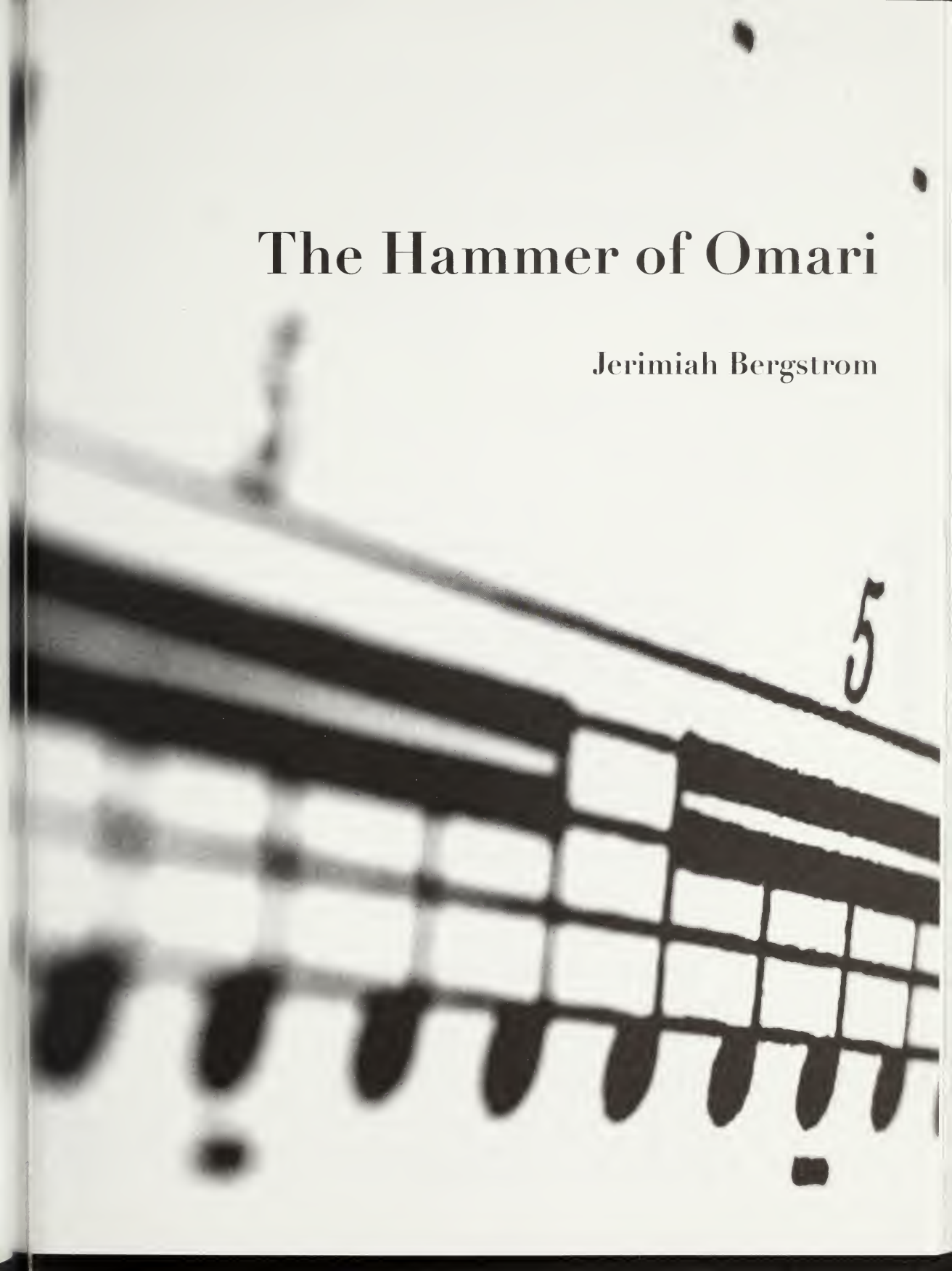
Winter was OK
When we shared the same blanket
Now my feet are cold

I can't swim a lick
I would drown in your ocean
Dry out in your salt

CONTEST FINALIST

The Hammer of Omari

Jerimiah Bergstrom



Sing whatever best suits this scene. Sing with me, all, for this cannot be mine alone the story of Omari.

Omari- let him ring from ear to hall to time hereafter: Omari and his Hammer. How with his iron-molded might he fended foes from home and hearth and heart. Common iron and wood, true, but swung like adamantium and Pelian ash, yielding wonders of both work and war. Grinning down the throat of dark death--

I'm getting ahead of myself.

Come. Let's make a mountain of this man:

Our Hero: A man named Anthony Omari.

Our Heorot: The Faraja Children's Home in Ngong, Kenya. Children's home. That's usually one of those words people tend to use to cover up a meaning they want to keep buried. But the Faraja Children's Home can proudly boast that moniker, and not have to worry about any unpleasant association with its uglier cousin-word, "Orphanage." And that's thanks to two people- namely Momma Omari and her son, Anthony- who built that place up from a shack to how it stands today. But we'll get to that in a bit.

The First Battle, Part 1: Darkness. That warm and happy black of a familiar bedroom. One that can lull you back to sleep simply through the smell of it. A bed you don't see but know will catch your fall, and a floor that your feet know as an old friend. Den, harbor, refuge and retreat. Your sanctuary.

But you've been here before: It's the middle of the night; a thump or something, real or dreamed, shocks you out of sleep. You spend the next few seconds trying to blink that sleep away so you can scan the room and prove to yourself that it was nothing. That none of the monsters in your dreams somehow escaped and slicked themselves in flesh. On this particular night (23 January, 2012, which for Kenya is the hot, dry season- he slept on top of sheets that night), Omari had the bum luck to find some of those night-fiends had grown alive and stood feet from his bed, with machetes in hand, grinning teeth gleaming in the filtered moonlight.

She was one of those women. Implaceable, determined, stalwart, optimistic-

Some Exposition: Omari's Momma ran the place. She was one of those women. Implacable, determined, stalwart, optimistic- a woman that holds the world on her hip. Someone who, once they've got an idea, has it so stuck in their skull that their only hope is to see it made into reality. A dreamer, usually, who simply does. If you are not one yourself, then I hope you know and cherish one. Momma had built the home from a one room shack (tin roofed- I imagine the rains were dramatic) into a home fit for 37 children who had no other.

Our Heorot: As I said, this is not an orphanage. Those places seem to be less where destitute children go to live and more where sadists go to work. Momma was not, could not be such- for without her, there would be no home. Just a house. Imagine: a woman who, after having borne the whips and scorns of triumphant child-rearing and reached that time when she could wash her hands of childhood forever, instead extends that invitation of "mother" out to every child within earshot. This is why we call her Momma. Instead of closing shop, Momma's family grew beyond blood, from 2 to a venerable 39, each child as real and dear to her as Anthony. She was living disproof to family being born of blood alone. Remember: Achilles was raised by a concept, Arthur a farmer.

A Retraction: Blood does serve some purpose; it provides a point of reference. When care was being heaped upon her forsaken children, management was assumed by the blood. Namely: Anthony. Momma ran the tin roof, and then the home, and Anthony became de facto father/custodian to those children who had neither. He made the beds (when the number of children grew beyond the number of beds, he made the pallets on the floor as well as the beds), he made the meals (warm, most times), he taught what he knew. Momma was adamant

in making sure everyone under her care received a primary education), and he tended to the sick (as best he could--supplies were short, expensive, and often stolen). He was the man who was never thanked for cleaning up vomit with sawdust or urine with lye (and sawdust), but who carried the infirm child from the outhouse and tucked them into bed, telling them all the while that yes, they'll feel better soon and no, no one will laugh at them for throwing up on themselves in the middle of dinner and if they do then just come tell him and he'll hang them from the weather vane and let them spin in the wind until they puke themselves. He cooed, Omari did. He had a legendary talent of being able to soften cries into sniffles, forge shame into pride, straighten backs, and, of course, clean up vomit.

Another roll Omari played: bodyguard. Indeed, four times within this past month Omari has had to take up the heavy mantle of protector. For these discomforting occurrences, Omari would be forced to do something he always regretted: he would have to beg forgiveness from his favorite tool.

The Hammer of Omari: You've seen these before. Wooden handle, darkened and scored through years of dust, sweat, and gripping use. Iron head, clawed back. Given to him by his father. Well, not so much given as appropriated. Long after his father had died, Omari needed to re-attach a hinge on the back door to his family's old house (this was before the home). Someone had broken in the night before--they had kicked the damned thing in--only to steal the food in the pantry. The deadbolt had torn its way out of the wooden door frame, rendering the lock useless, but Omari wanted the door back up nevertheless- if only for appearances. He remembered that his father had liked to keep a small box of tools for the occasional fix-it, so he searched the house and found them in the closet of the bedroom that was now just Momma's. And, as Omari curled his hand around the creaking metal handle, suddenly the tools were his. The hammer had proven to be one of the most versatile of the set, and was thus the most often used.

Omari's (admitted) laziness in cleaning up after fixing the door proved wise; the hammer was the only tool of the set that was left behind when, on some other night, someone broke into the house again and made off with the toolbox. Since then, Omari usually kept the hammer on or near his person (though he'd probably deny any affection if you asked him about it). A good, sturdy tool. When Momma had closed her private house in favor of opening a more public one, the hammer had travelled with Omari.

Someone had broken in the night before--they had kicked the damned thing in

An Interesting Distinction: It's fascinating how much something as simple as intent can completely change a situation. For instance: a child, soul simmered to a shocked apathy and belly bloated with hunger, can walk down the short path leading to the Faraja Children's Home in the middle of the day and be greeted by a large weeping woman and a young man who would be trying his damndest to look stern. Yet if an adult male walked down that very same path, cloaked in the shroud of night, most likely carrying the same malnourished gait as the aforementioned child, he will be greeted by only the young man (this time the sternness being quite genuine) and his hammer.

The Crux of Omari's Disdain: It is that exact moment. Or each of those moments, since this has happened time after time. He can almost feel the hunger of the man, stalking down the path, toward the home in the middle of the night. But he can also feel the approaching man's intent. And so Omari would look down and apologize to his hammer. He would ask silent forgiveness because, in that instant, by the pure grip of his will, he would transform that tool from an instrument of work into an instrument of war. These ideas were as opposite to Omari as good and evil, creation and destruction, light and dark. His hammer spent most of its time as a conduit for love and life, crafting and repairing the home in any time of need. But in these seldom, regrettable moments, Omari was fully and unquestioningly prepared to quench the iron head in that starving man's brains.

Until last night, he had never actually had to use it as a weapon.

A Comforting Fact: Until last night, he had never actually had to use it as a weapon.

Last night, he had been woken up at some insignificant hour by a creak from the front door. Footsteps. Down the hallway. Only half of Omari's brain heeded it. Could be Momma leading a kid to the outhouse. Could be some little troublemaker out for a midnight escapade to the food pantry. Could... boots? The kids-- Momma didn't wear boots.

He sighed, and reached under his bed.

Omari Trivia: He kept the hammer under there. He felt around the floor, found, and gripped the wooden handle. The handle was smooth as a mighty stone that spends its infinite eons dwelling upon the proud top of some craggy peak, is cast down by nature and glacial temperament and, landing in some coursing stream nearby, weathers down to its granite heart by the slow coursings of water across sad time, defeating the former presence of the peak, yet refining the remnant of a remnant into a wizened and scoured new life- so is the Hammer

of Omari's handle smooth. The tool arose with him, silently standing. Shirtless from the heat and tense, Omari crept to the door to his room. With his hand on doorknob, lights sweep across the gap to the floor, almost touching Omari's toes. Turning the knob, slow, quiet, he slipped out the door, just another shadow.

Three men. Probably four. Holding flashlights and weapons: crowbar, machete, pistol. Fourth guy emerges from the kitchen: crowbar. Outnumbered. Outweaponed. They were stealing his kids' food.

A Homeric Quote: And Diomedes lord of the war cry prayed aloud,
"Hear me, daughter of Zeus whose shield is thunder,
Athena! If you ever stood by my father
with all your love amidst the blaze of battle,
stand by me, Athena.
Bring that man into range and let me spear him!"
...Now, triple fury seized him,
and so raging Diomedes mauled the Trojans.

You can see where this is going.

The Battle: After some quick discussion, the two crowbar-wielding men and the machete holder went back into the kitchen, leaving the gun toting man to guard the hallway. Omari took a deep breath, stepped forward, pulled his arm back, and, bellowing the wordless rage of the heart, released the hammer like a tomahawk. It soared true, collapsing the gun-toting man's temple and sending him deflated to the floor. Before Omari had time to move, the other three men dashed out of the kitchen. They looked down at the unconscious man, then looked up at the heaving darkness baring vicious teeth back at them. Then they saw the hammer on the floor, speckled blood glinting in the flashlight beam. They scooped up their fallen man and beat a retreat as fast as their awkward procession would allow.

Panting, Omari scooped up the dropped gun, then walked back to his room and lobbed it onto his bed. No need for anyone to see that. He'd get rid of it in the morning. Returning to the hallway, he was just reaching down for his hammer when a child (if she was five years old I'd be surprised) popped her head out of the doorway nearest him. She didn't say a word, just looked at her silent, stoic protector. He smiled the sad smile of a lie and said, "Stubbed my toe. Get back to sleep." She accepted this with the unquestioning fidelity of youth and turned around, closing the door behind her. Omari picked up the hammer, and frowned at the streak of blood coursing down its claw. The blood

was drying; it'd be tough getting it all the way off. He wiped it away as best he could and placed it under his pillow. In another room of the home, the same little girl who had investigated earlier was doing the same with a stuffed paper doll.

The Art of in Medias res: So much for exposition. That all happened the night before we first visited Omari. Remember: he awoke with monsters 'round his bed. At first they were just shapes- malicious dark masses of the not. Normally these things turn out to be a coat, hastily thrown onto the corner of a door; or a chair, with several somethings stacked on top of it. But once Omari's eyes adjusted to light, he saw no chair--instead: a livid, hastily stitched scar, running down the side of a man's temple. The night before returned to Omari and he knew at once that he was fighting: this was simple revenge. Omari, surrounded by four men with machetes and himself still lying in bed, sighed and reached under his pillow.

Some more Trivia: Even holding a machete won't stop a man from squealing. The man with the scar recognized the instrument of his destruction from the night before and did what anyone would be expected to do: he hurled the machete at Omari and ran. The blade missed our hero by over a foot and clanged uselessly against the wall, falling behind the bed where it laid until Omari fished it out months later. Overcome by simple rage, Omari launched to his feet, hammer outstretched in his ready hand, and stared down his four assailants.

Some more Trivia: Even holding a machete won't stop a man from squealing.

The Battle, Part 2: His scream shook the house. The three men remaining seemed stunned by the blast. Omari rushed forward, and the men at once forgot that they were holding machetes. They put them up, but only in defense, trying to cover their faces from the brunt of his blows. They had no time to swing in between the heavy rain of iron Omari warred down upon them. They were pushed back--what else could they do?--out of his room, out down the hallway, and out to the path leading up to the front door, helpless against a swinging tempest of screams and steel. A cry sounded behind him, and Omari turned. That same small insomniac had awoken and was staring, her eyes torn wide with shock, at the battle in the courtyard. Omari screamed "Back in the house, child!" and, instinctually, she ran. When he turned back around, he was greeted with eleven inches of regained muster and cold steel.

A Wicked Wound: The machete slashed vertically down his face, unzipping skin from forehead to cheek, stopping with a hard thunk only when it reached

the bone of his skull. No matter. His right eye saw only a dripping red, but Omari didn't need to see to swing. Omari Lord of the War Cry advanced and connected, again and again, with the one who dared hit him.

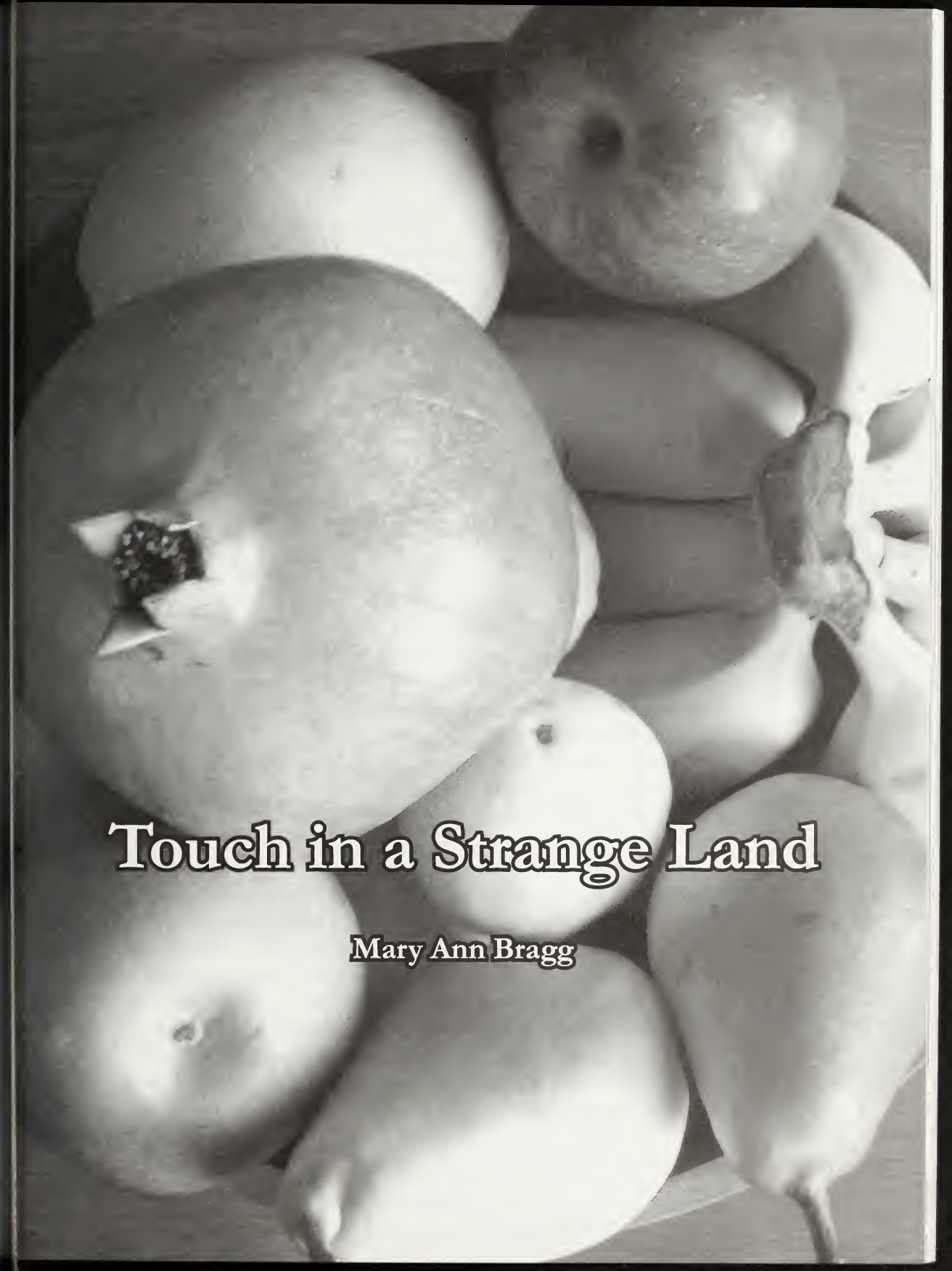
The man limped as he fled. The rest, their pack broken, followed. Hasty footsteps thudded like game in the silent night. The world buzzed; blood stained the granite walkway. Omari was... getting confused. He turned. Turned back, to the... doorway. Dripping. ... As he moved. Inside. Lock the door. Children: crying but... None hurt. Smiled, wet for some reason. Heart beating in his face- but...

He even managed to make it to his bed before collapsing.

An Epilogue: Omari awoke in a hospital. Eleven stitches and a legendary scar, but otherwise fine. Eventually, he returned home. He had survived the battle, roaring defiance in the face of his enemies, and walked away triumphant.

His fight was not forgotten, and eventually caught attention of the world at large. Money poured forth from outside hearts into the Faraja Children's Home; now they have proper gate and guard, affording Omari and his hammer to focus on the right work: a striking symbiosis of iron and flesh to fix, build, nurture and grow.

A Final Thought: Legend provides truth that is not fact, but the gleaming gilt of ages, doubling wonder with every generation. Like most heroes, Anthony Omari existed, and is the stuff of not just novels, but history books. Remember: people die. But it is the deeds of people that are deified into myths, cast in the echoing recesses of their written names--people who became heroes like wine, aging and sweetening as the generations turned. It is our reverence and repetition that build their thrones, and thus it is our duty to sing for any new voice added to the list of myths. So come, sing whatever best suits your scene, and let's make a mountain out of this man.



Touch in a Strange Land

Mary Ann Bragg

It was an accident in the garage. I'm a boy and he's a boy, and I didn't know what it was. It was a mistake, and now some boys are bothering me, passing me notes in class. Queer Boy. Ball Boy. My mom, she's busy. She works. She sees Mr. Dalton. I work at Mr. Dalton's toy store and he comes for dinner and stays to the morning sometimes. I've stolen paint balls, red ones, from the back shelves. I'm going to plaster those boys.

Two men have moved in down the street. The boys in class call them homos, the queers, a bowl of fruit, but I watch the men from my bedroom window. One of them is digging a hole. They are planting a tree. They roll the tree off the back of their truck. I bike by. There are splotches of brown, dirt bombs, on the side of their house. I go to the ball field and practice with Teddy. He's the only boy who still talks to me. There's a lady on the French tapes at school. She tells me to listen. She tells me those boys are bad. Ces garçons sont mauvais. She says that she's sorry. The boy, he pushed me away, in the garage. A touch. I didn't realize it would happen. It was an accident. Je suis tellement désolé. I am so sorry, the lady on the tape says.

My mom went to high school with one of the men, Caleb, and he is gay and the other man is his boyfriend, she says. She's invited them to come over sometime soon. I sit on the corner and watch them. They turn the hose on and wash the splotches off the side of their house. Caleb waves to me. His boyfriend teaches college, my mom says. They moved here for his job but he's not out to his family, as far as she knows. She and Mr. Dalton say something about the idiots in this town, and Mr. Dalton says people ought to be able to love whoever they want. I look up a word in the French dictionary at school: un homosexuel.

I'm sitting on the grass in their yard. Caleb and his boyfriend are on the front steps, and we're drinking Cokes. Caleb is going to France on business. He says sushi's not his favorite food. Neither is liver. He'll eat a lot of bread. "Beaucoup de pain," he says. "Et beaucoup de fromage," I say back. Caleb laughs. "And a lot of cheese." His boyfriend's name is Tom. He and I practice throwing balls in the yard. He squats down and hits the palm of his glove with his fist.

I find this on my locker in red ink. "Call me. 0088. Call me tonight, fruit basket." I wipe it off with my sleeve. I look down the hall but no one's looking at me. In class, the lady on the tape tells me to listen and be careful. Attention! C'est un gros problème. Those boys are big trouble, Teddy says. He's standing at my locker. That evening, in my bedroom, I line up the paint balls on my desk. Mom knocks. "Mr. Dalton and I will be back later," she says through the door. I put the balls in my pockets. I make the call. 0088. I listen. I leave the house.

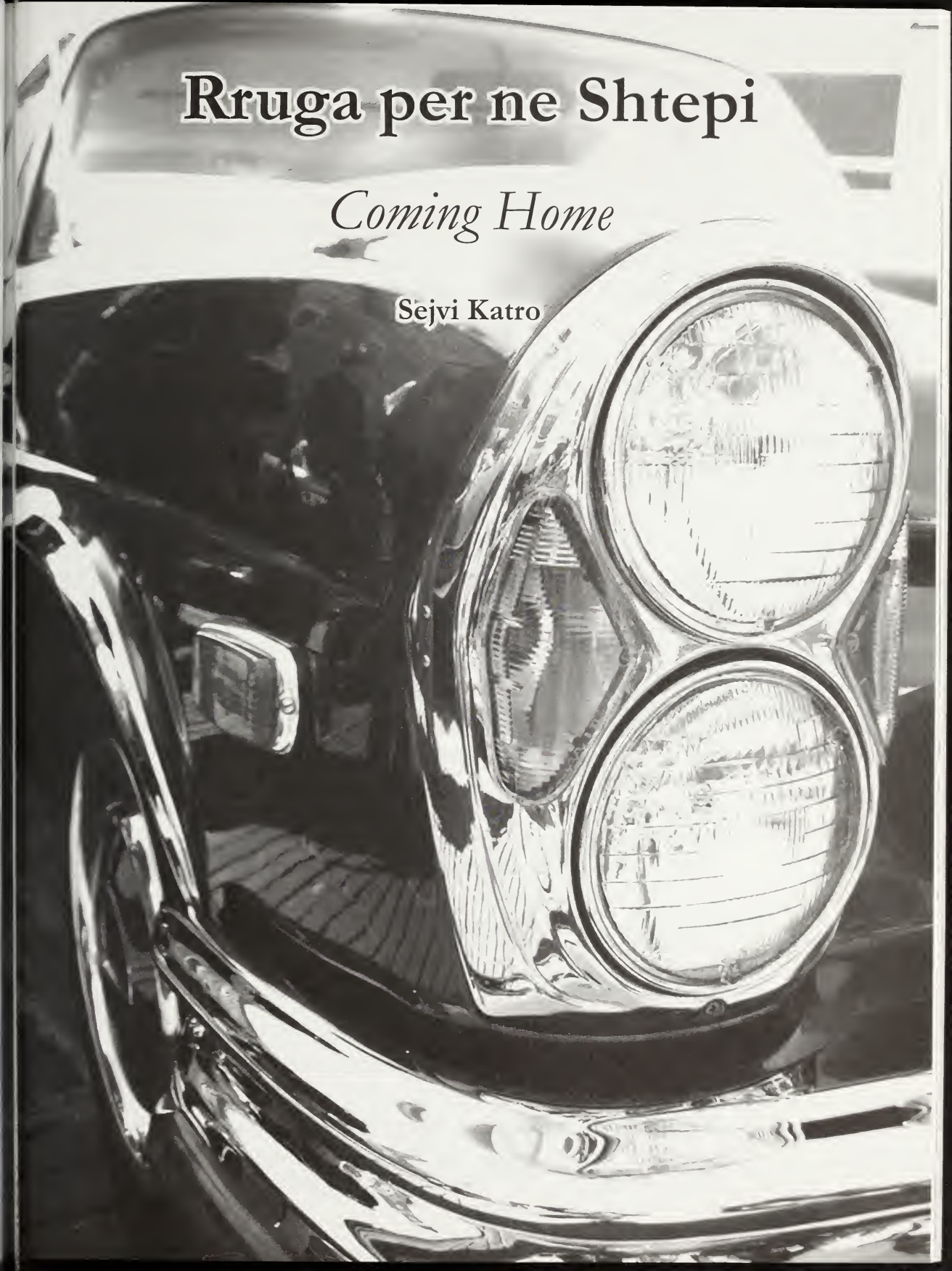
The front window shakes but does not break. Tom opens the door and looks down the street. I see him from the alley. The glass is splotched brown. Another one hits the window. The mess drips to the ground. A boy jumps me from behind and pelts my head. Another boy punches my ears. I know who it is. I roll in a ball and wait for it to stop. It doesn't stop. It doesn't stop. Finally it stops and I'm sitting on the grass, panting, red stains on my pockets. My face is wet. My ears ring. There's another thud on the window and then Tom is running down the street. He follows a jacket, a kid on a bike under the streetlights, and I'm running too, following them past Dr. Scott's house, past Miss Argenbright's house. Tom tackles the kid, straddles him. The kid, I know who it is, raises his arm. "Faggot, get off me," he yells. Tom brings his fist back but stops. He stops. He stands up and walks away. I slip behind a tree and creep home. In the bathroom mirror I stare at the lump on my forehead.

In France, Caleb is sitting at a café next to three young women. They are giggling. They write in a notebook and show it to him: "Korea." They hand him a camera. He takes a photo of them. They thank him with a charm, a tiny fruit basket, red and orange and green, wrapped in plastic. They put their heads together, thumb through a dictionary and come up with the word: "Fruit." They want a photo of him with the charm. One of them reaches over, as my mother does when she finds me in the bathroom. The young woman reaches over and brushes Caleb's hair back from his brow. Later he opens a door on the street to a bar, and it's a relief once inside, un homosexuel, to be among his own.

Rruga per ne Shtepi

Coming Home

Sejvi Katro



I watched from my window as the trees blurred into a yellow-reddish stream.

"We moved here for you. We want you to be happy." Dad said, taking the exit.

I sighed. "I know." All immigrant parents think alike. They claim you can become whatever you want, but you can't major in that field. You can marry whoever you want, but you can't love that guy. You can live wherever you want but not move too far away from family. I'm surprised my parents have not said, "Never mind, you messed up. Let's move back." I turned to look at my father. "Can we just drop the topic now? I want to enjoy these days home and I don't want Ma to nag."

My father nodded, huffing.

The Mercedes pulled into the driveway. The headlights made the tacky, inflammable, plastic turkey look like it was roasting in the oven. My mom refused to throw it away because she had bought it by herself at Target five years ago.

"It's good to have you home," Dad said, smiling. He patted my knee and exited the car.

A cold gust of wind blew a few dead leaves inside. I took a deep breath. I cringed at the idea of entering the house; my own apartment had become more welcoming in the last three years. I loathed talking to my mother as she

regarded me with her sad, disappointed eyes, and smiling at aunts who kept asking, "Do you have a boyfriend yet?"

I stepped out of the car. There would be no peace for the next three days. Instead, there would be people coming in and out of the house at unearthly hours, cars parked on top of each other, guests lined up on the living room's couches, and dancing to loud folk music until one of the neighbors called the police. And all this time I would be in the kitchen preparing food and serving it. Being an Albanian girl is like being a waitress, only you never get any tips at the end of an exasperating night.

After the third try, I managed to unlock the front door. I was engulfed by the smell of cigarette smoke, alcohol fumes, and a faint aroma of roasted meat. The floating chatter of about twenty people crammed into the very white and very fluffy living room greeted me. Since it's considered rude to book it to your room after entering the house (at least my mother would say so) I had to stand at the entrance of the room as my aunts and uncles hugged me and pinched my cheeks. The funny part is that I'm only related to about two of them, the rest I just call that so I don't have to remember their names.

"Alba, put your slippers on!" My mother's voice boomed through the room as she shooed the crowd away.

"Nice to see you too, Ma!" I said, not taking my heels off.

"Welcome home, zemer." My mother kissed my brow.

I breathed in, smelling the perfume I had bought her last Christmas mixed with the aroma of the food she had been cooking. I wrapped my arms around my mother. It was good to be home when I had her to protect me from gossip. She would be on my side, until I did something wrong.

"Fiora, come check on meat!" someone yelled from the kitchen, and my mother turned.

"Come help in kitchen," my mother said. Before I could protest I was hauled through the living room and pushed toward the marble counter in the center of the kitchen.

"Bledi, what the hell are you doing here?" I asked my cousin, who was standing between my aunt and another woman who looked me up and down before turning to the onions she was chopping.

"Better here than dealing with my dad and your dad getting hammered on raki," he said, flashing one of his sarcastic grins.

"Stop talking fast, people no understand!" my aunt said, waving her knife in

the direction of the other woman in the kitchen.

"Alba," my mother said, wrapping her arm around my waist and pulling me forward. "This is Rezi. Her and her husband arrived yesterday from Albania. They won the lottery."

Regardless of how many times I had explained to my mom that it was called a diversity visa and not "the lottery", she kept referring to the process that way. I just flexed my face in a smile and waited as my mother switched to Albanian to introduce me to Rezi.

"They have a daughter… oh, there she is," my aunt said. "Alba, this is Ina."

I turned to look at the girl standing in front of me. She was tall and thin, like most Albanian girls, but she wore little makeup. Her smile was tentative and she gripped the counter tightly, her eyes dashing off from one spot to the other.

"Do you speak English, Ina?" I asked, holding my hand out.

"I do," she said. I could hear the faint accent she had gained from learning it as a second language in school but it would wear off. Mine had.

"Did you take them to get their social security?"

My mom shook her head. "We thought we wait until after holiday."

"Yeah man, they gotta enjoy some true American lifestyle before going into the immigrant struggle," Bledi said, wrapping his arm around my neck and squeezing tightly.

"If you mess up my hair I swear I will dropkick you so hard you'll forget English." I tried to swing at him but he kept his hold on my neck.

"Stop acting stupid and check on turkey," my aunt said, slapping the back of his head.

"We go sit down for a little."

"This is child labor, Ma," I yelled as the three older ladies left.

"So, Ina, how creeped out are you right now?" Bledi asked, tossing some chopped salad in the large crystal bowl my mom used for special occasions only.

I smiled as Ina blinked, looking at him a little confused. "He means, how are you feeling?"

"Oh, fine…I… it's all so weird."

"My house is not usually this crazy."

Bledi snorted. "Yes it is!"

I rolled my eyes. "Watch out you don't break that bowl or my mom will kill you."

"Naah, auntie loves me—"

Whatever Bledi was saying was drowned out as two high pitched screams preceded my younger cousins' entrance into the kitchen. They ran toward me, bouncing up and down as they took turns hugging me. I swear I was never that annoying when I was sixteen.

"Alba, I missed you so much," Gerta, the youngest, screeched in my ear. "Oh, your hair looks so nice. When did you dye it?"

"Can I borrow some of your clothes while we stay here?" Gerta's sister, Gia, asked, beaming hopefully at me.

"You're staying here for a day. What clothes do you need?" Bledi asked.

I sighed, detangling myself from the jungle of arms that had me trapped against the counter. "We'll see about that. Now, why don't you take Ina to the computer room and make conversation?"

"And by conversation she means actual talking, not scrolling through your iPhones in silence," Bledi added, winking at me.

Gerta and Gia rolled their eyes and marched toward Ina, who smiled shyly at them. I wished I could spend more time with her, but if the turkey burned, my mom would serve me for dinner.

"Oh, Alba I forgot to tell you. I saw Toni the other day. His wife has really gotten fat." Gerta and Gia giggled as they rushed out of the kitchen.

I saw Ina blush before she followed them. I sighed, slumping against the counter. Bledi handed me a glass of wine and wrapped his arm around my shoulders. "Do you think they stop and reflect before speaking?" I asked.

Bledi chuckled. "You know they did not mean it like that."

I shrugged. "It's not a family gathering until someone brings up my failed engagement."

"You make it sound worse than it is."

I turned toward Bledi and raised an eyebrow at him. "Me breaking off my engagement could only be topped if I was at the altar and changed my mind again."

"To you!" Bledi raised his glass. "For having the balls and not getting married when everyone expected you to."

"That does not make it any better." I said, gulping down the content of my glass.

"God damn, girl, you are so dramatic," Bledi said as he went to check on the turkey.

"It's a skill you learn from listening to Albanian moms gossiping while you serve coffee."

"Let's add sarcastic bitch to the list," Bledi said, chuckling.

I sighed. "Why are we even cooking tonight? Thanksgiving is tomorrow."

"My mom calls this a trial cooking and your mom loves to cook."

I rolled my eyes. "Yes, and now you go be a manly man and leave the cooking to me like it should be," I said, pushing Bledi toward the kitchen door. I turned to the turkey chuckling. My shoes were starting to pinch at my toes. I leaned on my heels to take the pressure off but it only made it worse.

The turkey was almost ready so I decided to clean up and straighten the kitchen before my mom started yelling and saying I was so messy no guy would want to marry me. I was well into the process of stacking the dinner plates by diameter in the cabinet when I heard two hushed voices just outside of the kitchen.

"Mom you're being ridiculous."

"Ina, I told you not to speak to her."

"But why? She is so nice."

"Do as I said, and if she asks you to go somewhere with her say no."

"This is about what those women were saying earlier, isn't it? It's not nice, mom. We are living in her house."

"It's not her house and stop talking about what you heard. That is grown up conversation…"

"Alba, put your slippers on," my mom said, entering from the other door.

I jumped, turning. "I'm fine, Ma."

"What's wrong?"

I shook my head. I should say what was wrong but that would just earn me a scolding. I knew what Rezi had heard. My Albanian was still good enough to understand an exchange between two people. "I'll go tell dad to get the wine."

"Why don't you take Ina with you?" my mom asked.

I walked past where Ina and her mother were standing. "I don't think she is supposed to talk to me," I said, studying Rezi's face as a blush spread across her cheeks. I walked on, my high heels making me regret I had spent so much money on such a fucking uncomfortable pair of shoes.

It was well past midnight when the last car pulled out of the driveway. My mom made sure to stay at the door and wave everyone off. I circled the living room one more time, looking for anything I had missed while cleaning up.

"Everyone was happy to see you," Dad said, coming back inside.

My nose twitched at the strong smell of smoke that hovered around him. "I'm sure they were," I said, picking up a cardigan that was draped on one of the chairs.

"What's wrong?" my mother asked.

Apart from trying to figure out who was talking shit about me in my house, nothing much. "Nothing, I'm just very tired. I think I'll go to bed."

"But you not speak with Rezi and Shpetim. They wanted to ask you some things."

I threw the cardigan on the chair. "Mom, I'll be here for three days. I'm sure we'll have time to chat. They won't be going anywhere anytime soon. That's the problem with Albanians, they never leave."

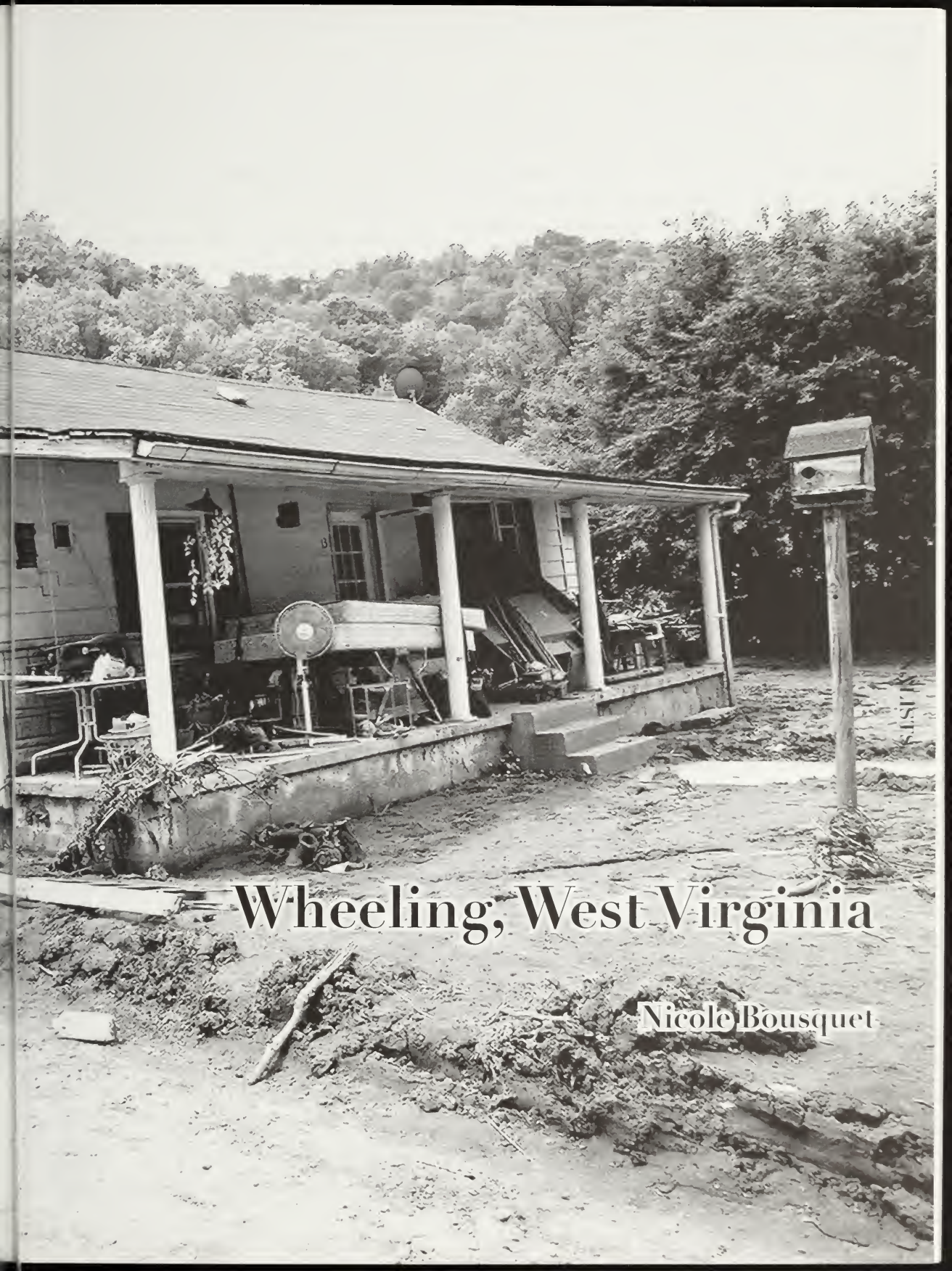
"Alba? What's wrong, *zemer*?"

I turned so my father would not see me roll my eyes. "I just want to go to sleep. Goodnight."

I marched upstairs, the heels of my shoes scrapping the wooden floors noisily. I reached the last door of the second floor's corridor and turned the knob. Nothing had changed. The room was suspended in time, the air was still. Everything felt old and new at the same time. I ran my hand along the right wall, my palm trailing across the posters stuck there, sagging under the clasp of the tape. A light cloud of dust twirled around me as I removed the cloth covering my vanity. I surveyed my books, touching a finger to the dust that had settled upon the heavy volumes.

I continued toward the bathroom, shedding clothes as I went. I stepped out of my high heels. The coldness of the tiles eased the throbbing of my feet. I placed my watch, my necklace, my ring, and my earrings in a line on the counter and reached for the white towel. I scrubbed my face until the skin was red and marked with makeup streaks.

My eyes went to the large bathroom tub. The tub had been waiting for me. It had been expecting me since it heard me step into the house. After all, it was not a proper homecoming until I had at least one good cry in the bathtub. I stepped in, shivering as the cold porcelain cooled my skin. It did not come at first. Anger, misery, rage, whatever I expected eluded me. My chest contracted and my nostrils flared and just when I was about to give up the first sob left my lips.



Wheeling, West Virginia

Nicole Bousquet

Wheeling, West Virginia is flat with many boxes. The houses have no columns or curves. Many are trailers, and many have sat for a long time. It did not seem to me, at seven, to be a place for a vacation during the best season of the year. It is not, unless you find yourself obligated to visit someone who has found himself or herself there. Rosalie, Corrine Dick, and Richard, a collection of relatives from my father's side, had found themselves there, were not better off for it, and I found myself obligated to visit.

Corrine is in boxes all the time. The ones that do not move are preferable. She is afraid of leaving her current box to go to another. It's the space in between. Her mother, Rosalie, is stuck in one box and can't get to another at all. Corrine gets it from her mother.

In order of severity, from greatest to least:

Gray Rosalie of the cobweb hair.

Corrine, 16, obese in a muumuu.

Dick, whom I cannot recall any significant trait about.

Richard, 27, his lungs beyond his years.

Of mother, daughter, father, son, some feel that they are taunted by both the near and the far places. Some are afraid of one over the other.

Obese Corrine, 16, in a muumuu: the gravity of her body drew her away from the canyon along the way to Wheeling Park High. If she had drawn near she surely would have fallen. The mass of the bus could not match this. She could feel that the core of the earth was drawn directly to the vertebrae of her spine behind her belly button. This she could not stand.

There were one hundred and eighty chances

every year. The number of times Corrine was able to round the canyon in the moving box en route to another stationary box, over the divisor: one hundred and eighty, was not satisfactory. Thus, another box was closed to Corrine

We camped in lieu of staying with them. They visited our campsite and we visited their lot. A box may sit in a field through a space of twenty years without great effect.

There was some trouble with our inflatable mattress. Richard tried to help but found his breath lacking.

In the trailer Corrine watched MTV on a brown couch covered in something like velvet. It was a constant for her, a comfort. The others have faded away now because I am less afraid of becoming them.

On TV, someone asked about what type of underwear a man wore; he dropped his pants in reply. Corrine changed the channel. "Oops we don't want to see that," she said to my father.

This is my crispest memory of the trip.

Every few months they would call and ask for seventy dollars, just for food. We would send it through Western Union.

Four years later, Uncle Dick got sick. He may not have attempted to leave his trailer and get to a hospital.

The fifth time I had spoken to him in four years, he told me on the phone, "It's nice to hear your voice."

After he died, Corrine, Richard, and Rosalie moved. The told us they were going to New Orleans to look for jobs. This was after hurricane Katrina. They had no cell phones. They called from a pay phone a few times over many years. The calls dropped off. Is it my place to find someone I never knew?

It's fuzzy. I don't understand whether my father or mother could have helped them. I was too young to think I had the ability to take action. I don't understand how their situation came about. Maybe the only reason my father is any better off is that, without a college degree, he found a customer service job that paid just enough but would allow him to stagnate: eat, sleep, and accept. What is this and does it run in my family?

I have no fear of rounding bends to get from box to box, whether under or above ground, no matter the degree of the curve. Once I get to the boxes I may sit within them without distress. I may write with a pen or pencil. I may look up or down. I remember excitement and reenact it. But I fear this is not satisfactory. I am not far enough removed.

It is too easy for me to understand how the ability to find joy in human interaction could be lost, how life could become habit. Once you are in motion, it's clear the difficulty was imagined, but inertia always provides a challenge.

I look forward to the silence of the morning. I look forward to the dark at night. It's the spaces in between.

Results of the Six-Word Story Contest

Hosted by the English Department in the Spring of 2014

Winner

Day nineteen:
burned the last chair.
Keller McGuinness

Runners Up

Music, lights gone. Still, we daneed.
Kevin Figueroa

"Stay tonight, the kids won't know."
Evan Arndt

Finalists

"My sheets stayed warm this winter."
Mikayla McGoff

The chandelier struggled with the weight.
Keller McGuinness

Paycheck.
Rent.
Bills.
Food next time.
Bryan Kreusch

Administration prohibited teasing after the wake.
Kevin Figueroa

Sold nightly, closer than you think.
David West

lovers' names on birch, scratched out.
Joseph Cruikshank

Two months clean, eight months pregnant.
Jaran Stallbaum

I tried scratching off these goosebumps.
Jaran Stallbaum

Worked overtime, bought house; hers now.
Evan Arndt

She resides in airports for love.
Brooke McCullough

Broken superhero, mend your cape: Fly!
Jillian Goss

Vanishing cream results in actual vanishing.
Amy E Gaeta

I've killed orphans for baby shoes.
Jacob Aguiar

Cardboard walls.
Newspaper skies.
Begging change.
Shannon L Peebles

Mother always loved her the most.
Anjali Pandey

Pockets stealthily filled with white knuckles.
Christian D Arthur

Death on holiday, he's writing poetry.
Christian D Arthur

Contributor Bios

Jacob Aguiar is the type of person who does not like having to write a few sentences about himself. Never the less, when asked to do so, he does so with grace and acumen. Jacob Aguiar enjoys reading, close reading, uncomfortably close reading. He enjoys puns and clever turns of phrase. He often lets his toe nails grow to unconscionable lengths. Jacob Aguiar would prefer to never stand in another goddamned line. Jacob Aguiar is a freelance journalist, an English Major, and a dog owner.

Evan Arndt came to Boston in 2010 to study songwriting at Berklee, and ended up writing lots of other things. Now he studies English at UMass and tries to spend his time reading great books, hanging out with creative people, and drinking good coffee. When he is not at UMass you can probably find him working at Pavement or playing music with friends.

Jerimiah Bergstrom is an English MA candidate. He enjoys Neil Gaiman, King Arthur, and can make a butternut squash pizza that is better than any others you might have tasted. (The secret is goat cheese.) He hopes that you will enjoy his work (specifically the story, but he can make the pizza too upon request).

Keegan Blute wrote a poem, "Antarctica," printed in this volume.

Nicole Bousquet wrote an essay, "Wheeling, West Virginia," printed in this volume.

Mary Ann Bragg is working on her Master's degree in English at UMass Boston. She lives in Provincetown, Mass. and is a reporter for a newspaper.

John C. Burns holds an MA in English from UMass Boston. Being from Everett, he has spent most of his life in and around Boston, and writing about his life experiences.

Spencer Dang is an out-of-state student from Memphis, Tn. His poem, Awakening, was inspired by a friendship that he hopes will one day become more.

Jaydon Daniels is a Pennsylvania native, and the experimental child of 4. He first established an interest in poetry at a young age. At roughly the same time, he became interested in music. He found a unique liking for the rhythm and rhyme of words and their ability to express a fluid and dynamic meaning. He tries to maintain an almost cryptic style to epitomize this form of verbal interpretation, and to allow all readers to find a way to connect to the piece on some level.

Sylvain Delzant is a French cartoonist currently living in Boston with his wife and a cat. Sometimes he misses Paris.

Michael DiClemente received a bachelor's degree in Italian Studies and Psychology from UMass Amherst. He taught Italian at various levels for a few years and then went on to pursue a master's degree in History. Michael completed his degree from UMass Boston in 2012 and is now teaching sixth grade Social Studies at the Andrews Middle School in Medford. He is currently working on a Graduate Certificate in Education at UMass Boston. Michael has enjoyed writing poetry since high school.

Ann Doyle lives in South Boston and is a member of OLLIE (Osher Lifelong Learning Institute). She retired from the T, where she spent most of her years working as a conductor on the Red Line (apologies to any persons who were hit by the doors). She ended her career answering customer complaints, where she was able to practice creative writing.

Evan Gildersleeve is a senior at UMB with a major in French and another in psychology. He is a Marine Iraqi War veteran that served in a sniper platoon in Ramadi, Iraq in 2008. The idea for his graphic novel came to him following the death of his brother George, who fought an 8-year battle with a terminal illness.

Midori Gleason just finished her English MA at UMass, and her second semester teaching. She is grateful to all her teachers and students

who have helped her, and she is excited to keep writing and drawing outside of school.

James P. Gordon wrote a poem, "PRELUDE TO A DREAM," printed in this volume.

Jillian Goss is a super senior English major and former Disney World employee. She started as a Nursing major but decided that that wasn't going to work out when she started writing short stories in the margins of her Anatomy notes. She recently started working at the Mass Media, which is fun. And sometimes she is too snarky for her own good.

Marissa Higgins is a writer living in Boston with her wife. She graduated from Bridgewater State University in 2012 with a Bachelor's degree in English. At UMass Boston, she is working on a Master's in English. Her work has been featured on The Huffington Post: Gay Voices, Thought Catalog, Policy Mic, Provocateur: A Literary Journal, and The Bridge Journal.

Tomas Hernandez wrote a story, "COLORs," printed in this volume.

Hallima Ibrahim is a resident of Boston of Somali decent and Kenyan Nationality. In her free time she likes to write poetry in random coffee shops and contributes to the on-line magazine Layali Magazine. You can find Hallimas work on MuslimGirl.net and Layali Magazine.com, and follow Hallimas on-going mission to change society and conscious thinking on twitter at @Quriky_Afro.

Sejvi Katro, from Albania, moved to Boston five years ago, loves fantasy fiction, writing, learning new languages, exploring new cultures, and would like to teach English as a second language in the future.

Amanda Kingsley hopes to eventually become an environmental journalist and exercise her love for writing to inspire others to care more about our natural world. She can be found curled in a armchair reading a new book, burning a new recipe on the stove, or eagerly ambling towards the nearest thrift store.

Kelsie Leonard wrote a poem, "The Bird," printed in this volume.

Jesse Mangan studied creative writing at UMass Boston. He can now be found laboring in warehouses and concert halls. His free time is spent hunched over a keyboard, trying to make sense of the world. Or playing Nintendo. More of his work can be found at jessemangan.tumblr.com.

John Mazzarella has been at UMass Boston in one form or another since 2002, and is currently investigating his options under squatters rights to formally take up residency in the Calf Pasture Pumping Station building. He is interested in in good pizza, and Internet subculture (which means he spends too much time eating junkfood while on Reddit).

Keller McGuinness, born and raised in Hudson Valley area of NY, current and foreseeable future resident of Somerville, passionate solver of crossword puzzles, eater of various cheeses, has never wrestled a Polar bear or been to Fiji.

Kristen Michaelis is a junior in the nursing program at UMass Boston. She writes some in her spare time, but most often when faced with the deadline of a contest or the expectations of one of her friends who write. Since coming here from the west coast in order to study, she eagerly awaits a lifetime of traveling far and wide across the world after graduation.

Joanne N. Michaud wrote a poem, "Time," printed in this volume.

Hamdi Mohamed is a somali American student here at UMass Boston. She enjoys reading and writing poetry, and appreciates all types of creative writing.

Ty Muto, former doodler and haiku crafter turned graduate student, spends most of his studying hours examining conflict resolutions systems and scribbling emo haikus. His end game is working and writing for peace, even if it's just one haiku at a time.

Antoinetta (Toni) Noe is a nineteen year old student, writer, photographer, traveler, thrifter,

and life enthusiast. She lives with her family and multiple pets just south of the city and spends her free time exploring, creating, and learning. She's currently an undeclared major due to a crazy brain and love for everything, but hopes to have that sorted out in the next few years. She submitted this piece on a whim and is more than honored to have been selected and rewarded.

Anna Piotrowski is from Dorchester, and a graduating senior with a B.A in English. Along with writing both short stories and poetry, she also enjoys learning about other art forms such as painting and sculpture. Due to an interest in Classical Studies, she has a strong fascination with Greek and Roman work in particular.

Jacqueline Perry wrote a short story, "The Restaurant," printed in this volume.

Allister Quilon is a student in the College of Science and Mathematics at UMass Boston. His short film, "speak_easy", is a finalist of the BAAFF's 2014 Short Waves contest. He is currently a co-organizer of the Slam Poets' Society, an organization that aims to increase opportunities for UMass students to share and work on poetry in inclusive spaces to improve public speaking and communication skills through performance art.

Adalene Rodriguez was raised in Puerto Rico. She is a senior, majoring in English with a Classics minor at UMass Boston. She loves to read and write, especially fantasy stories and novels.

Alex Rodriguez is a pretty regular 26 year old guy getting his master's degree in applied economics at UMass Boston. While his studies focus on economics, Alex has long considered himself to have a creative soul which prompted his interest in writing. Last summer while working at TAG in Arts (a summer program at UMass Boston) Alex wrote and directed a short musical film, alongside the students in the program. His poem in this volume was written a few years ago for an undergraduate creative writing class at Framingham State University.

Joshua Ronan is from the South Shore of Massachusetts and is currently in the College of Nursing and Health Sciences.

Ameera Skandarani is a 25 year old college senior majoring in English literature, hoping to graduate in May 2015. She recently moved back to Framingham, MA, after spending three years in Tennessee. She enjoys playing softball and soccer in my free time. Her favorite writer of all time is Edgar Allan Poe, and she spends more time than she is willing to admit picking apart "The Raven" and "The Tell Tale Heart."

Miles Stafford writes, reads, and rides his bike in Jamaica Plain, MA. The works of Kobo Abe, Charles Burns, and Philip K. Dick sustain his lifelong interest in the bizarre. In the future, he aspires to attend law school and to finish his debut novel.

Davin Surin is a 2012 graduate of UMass Boston. He is currently seeking his Master's degree in Conflict Resolution. Davin serves as a reserve member of the U.S. Air Force and is also a member of the Mass Media student newspaper. Due to his experience in journalism and interest in photography, he has taken a keen interest in documenting everyday life with his camera.

Helen Tisserand wrote a poem, "Ode to Toothpaste," printed in this volume.

Pat Tomaz is a full time student in my fourth year as well as a pastry cook, and enjoys vegetarianism, horror and martial arts films, audiobooks, goldfish and koi ponds, tattoos, and skateboarding. "Shout outs to my friend's cat Harvey Keitel, The Blackpool metal crew, and The Comic Book Palace."

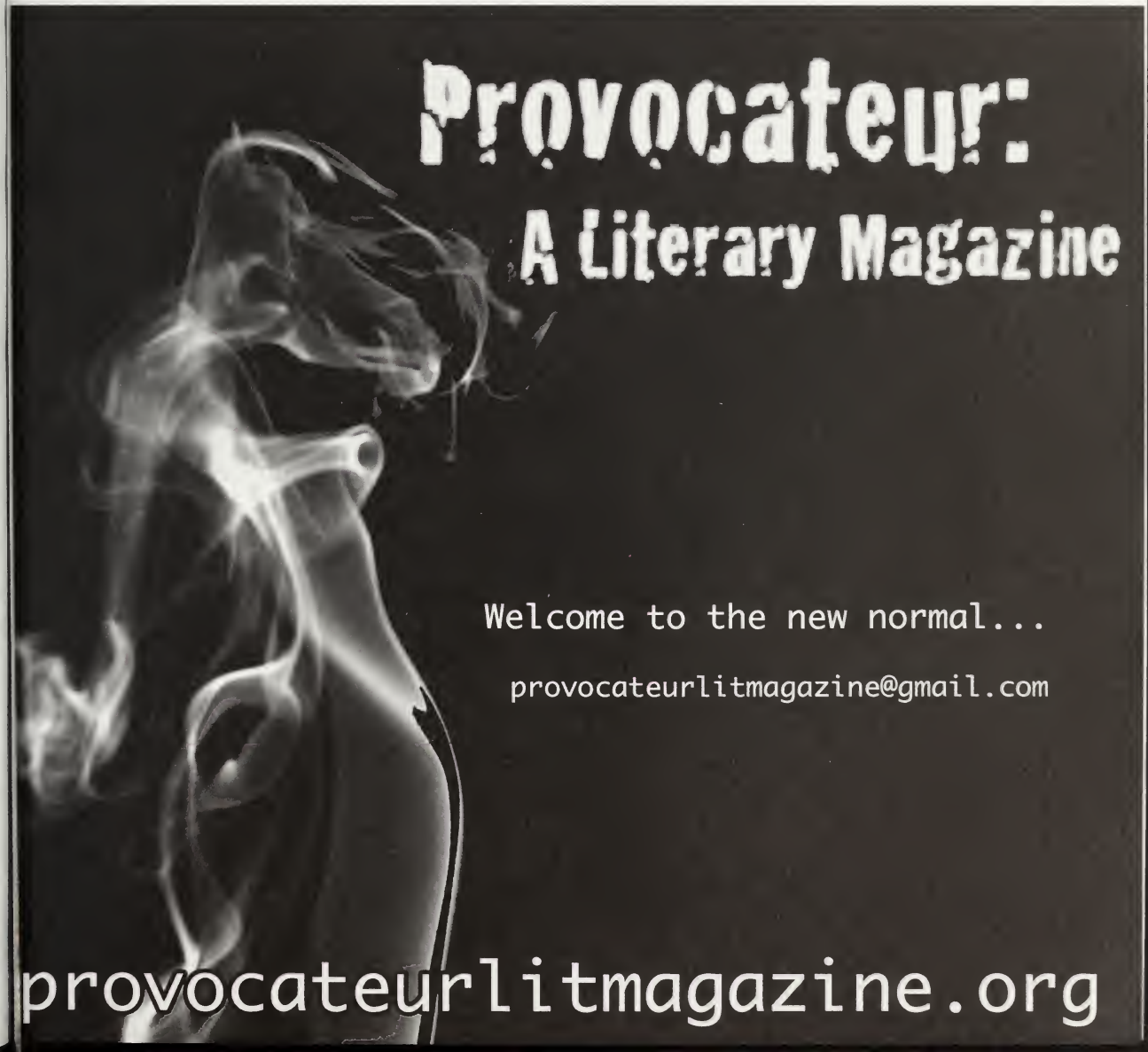
Melinda Taylor is a mom, Christian, partner, friend, lover, daughter, sister, granddaughter, niece, psychology student, writer, musician and a woman of mixed race and ethnicity who has a physical illness and is still trying to grow up.

Kevin Figueroa Torres is going into his sophomore year at UMass Boston. He is nineteen, Puerto Rican, and enjoys reading,

writing, dancing, and street performing on the Boston Common or in Salem, MA."

Valerie Vargas is a Junior at UMass Boston from Miami, FL, majoring in English and Political Science. She is a poet, and pursuing a career in publishing and editing.

Inna Varshavskaya was born in Ukraine and moved to America when she was 6. She has traveled to Ukraine many times to visit her family. She enjoys traveling and learning about different cultures. Currently she is a student at UMass Boston, studying early childhood education. She decided to go into this field when her niece was born and realized how much love she has for children. She is very family oriented and would not be where she is today without her family's support and love. She wrote the poem in this volume in the summer after her senior year in high-school. "I had a difficult time of saying goodbye to my friend who passed away from cancer because he lived in Ukraine and I was not able to travel there for the funeral. By writing this poem I was able to say goodbye to him. Everyone has their own way of coping with a loss and this was mine."



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Dr. Glen T. Martin's Human Dignity and World Order

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Daniel A. Hoyt's Hank Williams Might Have Died Here

Oksana Chelysheva's Russia' Political Prisoner Situatio

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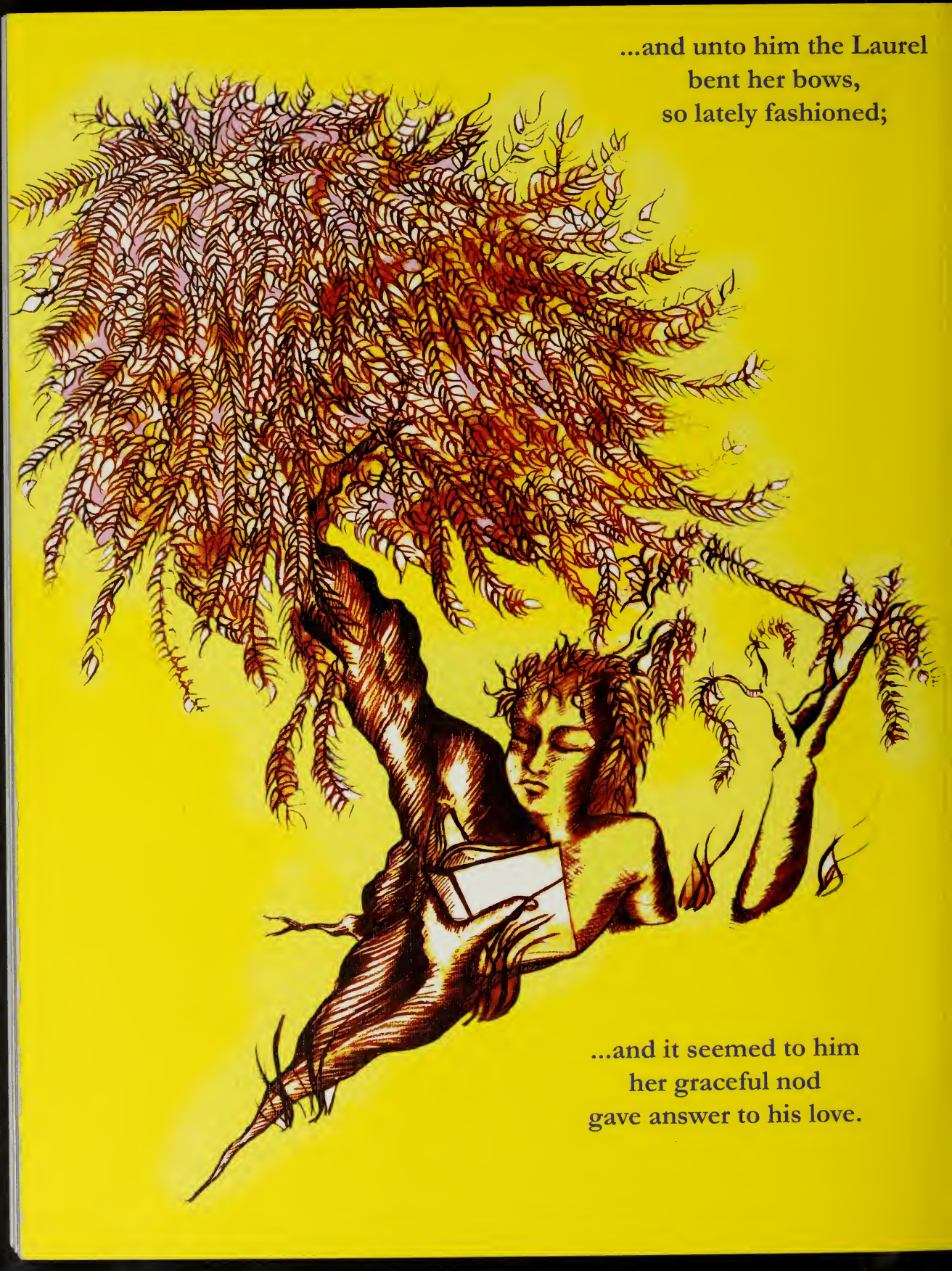

...and unto him the Laurel
bent her bows,
so lately fashioned;

...and it seemed to him
her graceful nod
gave answer to his love.